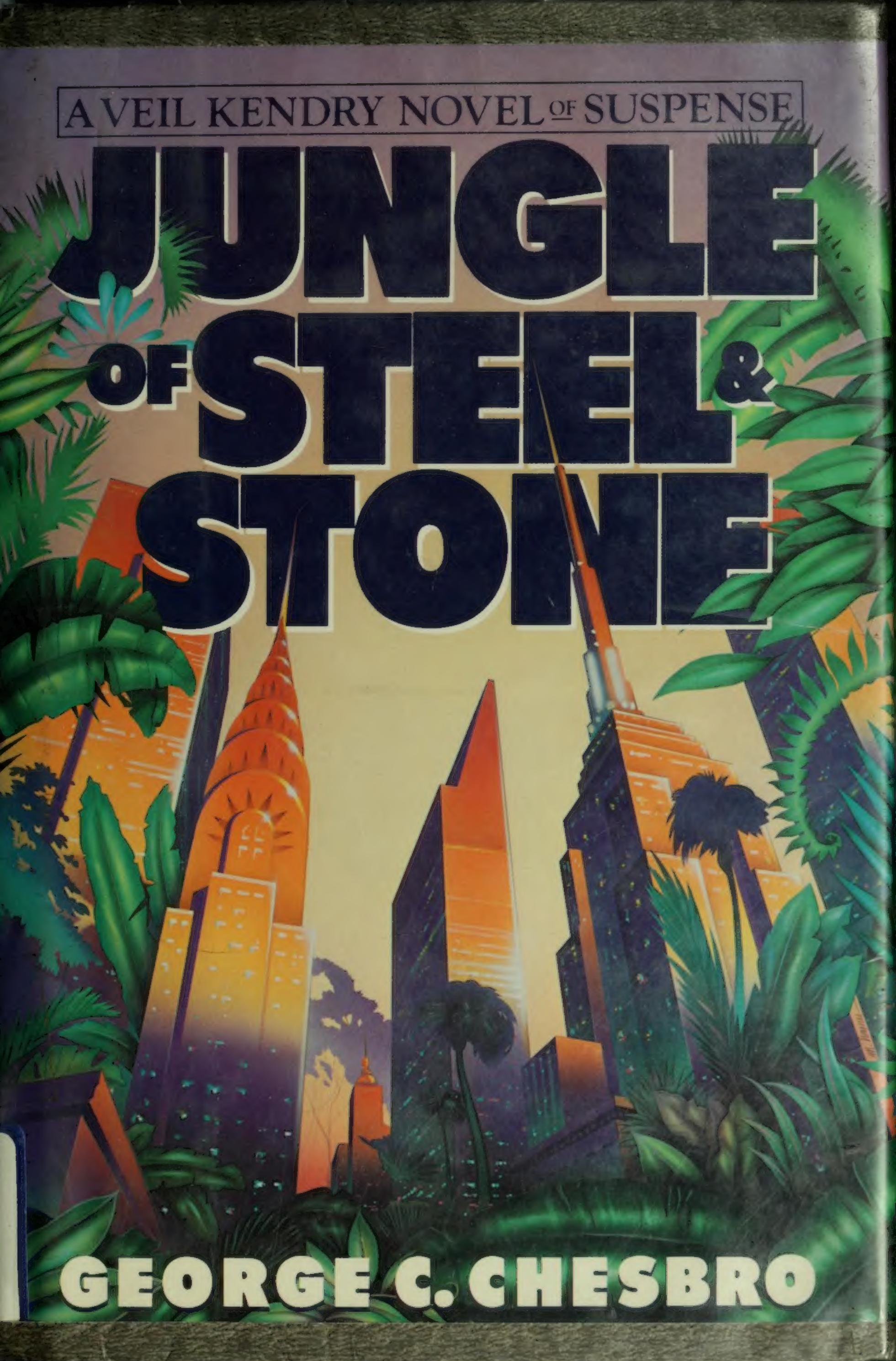
A VEIL KENDRY NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

JUNGLE OF STEEL & STONE



GEORGE C. CHESBRO

$16.95 FPT

JUNGLE OF STEEL & STONE

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The *Nal-toon*—the carved wooden god-totem of the K'ung tribe of Africa's Kalahari Desert—is stolen from the midtown art gallery that exhibits Veil Kendry's dream-paintings. It isn't hard to identify the thief: Tobal'ak, a K'ung warrior-prince flown in to publicize the original theft of the idol from the tribe, had snatched the statue and pinned the security guard to the wall with a tribal spear before rushing into the relative safety of Central Park.

It wouldn't seem difficult to run down an African tribesman in Manhattan. But the prince is a superior warrior, able to conceal himself even in the wastes of the Kalahari.

The police aren't the only ones looking for Tobal'ak. There's the lovely missionary, Reyna Alexander, who enlists Veil's aid. And for reasons unknown to them, the *Nal-toon* is of obsessive interest to the *Cosa Nostra*—and to Carl Nagle, the most corrupt cop in New York.

Veil must use his paranormal dream-powers to enter the mind of the warrior-prince, locate him, and ensure his—and the *Nal-toon*'s—return to the Kalahari. But time is short; Nagle and his squad of vigilantes are quite willing to kill Veil, Reyna, and Tobal'ak in their quest for the idol.

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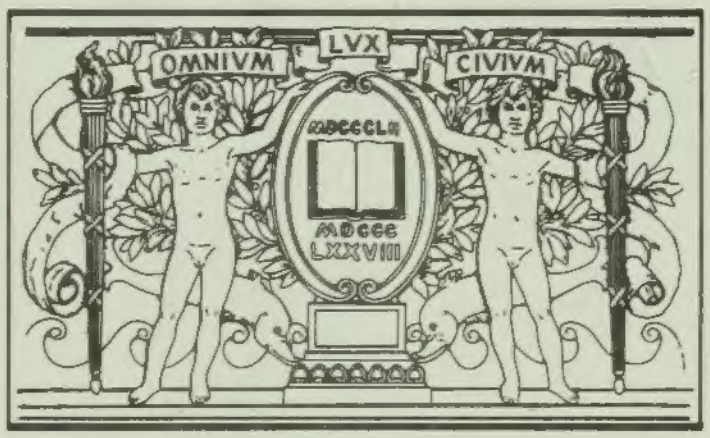

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JUNGLE OF STEEL & STONE

By George C. Chesbro

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JUNGLE OF STEEL & STONE

GEORGE C. CHESBRO

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for Mark and Michaele

JUNGLE OF STEEL & STONE

Chapter One

Veil dreams.

Vivid dreaming is his gift and affliction, the lash of memory and a guide to justice, a mystery and sometimes the key to mystery, prod to violence and maker of peace, an invitation to madness and the fountainhead of his power as an artist.

Now vivid dreaming is also his passport to the land where his love is lost.

"Come to me," Sharon whispers. "Love me, Veil. Tango with me on the edge of time."

"Yes," he replies, and begins his dream journey through no time and across no space to the place beyond the Lazarus Gate, a perilous state of consciousness a sigh from death that only Veil can reach and return from safely. Sharon had gone beyond the Lazarus Gate to be with him at his time of greatest danger, and now she is trapped there.

As he approaches death he becomes pure blue flight, an electric pulse with no differentiation between body and mind. There are no fixed reference points, no sound, only

the conviction that he is traveling at great speed. Then light arcs through him, flashing like lightning down his spine. He explodes and is reassembled, floating weightless, before the shimmering white radiance of the Lazarus Gate. As he unhesitatingly passes through there is another flash of blinding light and a great, booming chime sound that he feels in his head, heart, stomach, and groin.

Sharon Solow, naked like Veil, waits for him in an infinitely long corridor bounded on both sides by walls of swirling gray where ominous, toothed shapes lurk, melting away and re-forming, sighing, beckoning. Although there is no wind here, Sharon's waist-length, wheat-colored hair billows behind her as she comes toward him, and her glacial-blue, silver-streaked eyes gleam with love and desire. Her laughter, like their voices, is a chime scale that bounces off the deadly surface of the surrounding walls and falls around them in a cascade of fluorescent sparks.

"How am I doing down there?" Sharon chimes as she touches his mind and blends her dream-body with his.

Veil laughs. "Down where?"

"Down, around, over, under, between—whatever. What's happening to the rest of me?"

"You're as beautiful as ever," Veil says, reacting to the anxiety in her voice, gently caressing her mind.

"Really?"

"Yes, Sharon. Obviously you're being fed intravenously, but you're breathing on your own. You're bathed every day, massaged and moved into a different position every six hours."

"Am I still at the Institute for Human Studies?"

"No."

"Where, then?"

"You're being cared for in a CIA clinic in Langley, Virginia—it's the best."

"You've never mentioned that before."

"You've never asked before."

Sharon frowns. "But the CIA is your enemy."

"Not the CIA—just a man by the name of Orville Madison."

"He's the 'fat fortune-teller' you once mentioned to me, the man who wants you dead, isn't he?"

"Yes. He was my controller twenty years ago, but he's moved up in the world since then; now he's the CIA's Director of Operations."

"I don't understand. If this man hates you so much, why would he allow me to be cared for in a CIA clinic?"

Veil does not reply. He tries to draw Sharon even closer to him, but she resists, moving back slightly in the endless corridor. In the wall to Veil's left, something moans.

"Tell me, Veil."

"It's not important."

"Please tell me."

"He's the man I made the arrangements with. Madison supervises your care."

"But he wants to kill you!"

"Yes, but in his own time and in a place of his choosing. For now it gives him pleasure to have power over me."

"And he has that power over you because of me, doesn't he?"

"Sharon—"

"What have you given him, Veil?"

My soul, Veil thinks. He says, "I've agreed to carry out certain special assignments for him when he asks—and if I approve of the assignments."

"I'm sorry, Veil."

"For what?"

"You've delivered yourself to a man who hates you in order to save me."

Veil shrugs. "I consider it a small price to pay for the woman I love. Besides, if not for what happened at the Institute, he might have put a bullet in my brain by now."

"But he intends to do that anyway!"

"One day, yes. But not now."

"You won't be free from him until I'm . . . well, will you?"

He would never be free, Veil thinks as he glances to his

right at the gray, chiming wall beyond which he had seen Sharon's flesh begin to glow and melt from her bones. His soul would belong to Orville Madison for as long as the CIA Operations Director allowed him to live.

"Madison is keeping his part of the bargain," Veil replies easily. "You're being kept in good health, and a team of specialists is constantly trying to work out ways to bring you back to consciousness."

"One day, maybe, I'll just be able to follow you back through the Lazarus Gate."

"Maybe."

"Does this Orville Madison know that you can contact me?"

"No."

"Does he know anything about this thing you can do?"

"Not really."

"Not really?"

"He knows about my brain damage and vivid dreaming, but not the rest of it."

Sharon laughs. "Wouldn't he be surprised!"

"I imagine so."

"But what does he think happened to me?"

"He just thinks you're in a coma."

"But he must have seen my EEG. Nobody in a simple coma spikes like that."

"He knows about the Lazarus Gate, but he thinks it's nothing more than a fleeting state of consciousness a very few people pass through just before death. He's right, of course."

"Except for you and me, Veil."

"Except for you and me." He could come and go at will; Sharon's mind was trapped there.

"If he ever found out that you can do this, he'd try to make you use it for him, wouldn't he?"

"Of course. Fortunately for me, Orville Madison's main interest is in controlling everybody around him and screwing his enemies. He loses interest quickly in things for which he can't see a practical application to his primary goals."

"Could you actually spy for him with your dreaming?"

"No. My dreams are just that—dreams. They're projections of my own mind, not an entry into anyone else's."

"But what is this?"

"This is an exception. Yours is the only mind I can actually touch; that's because you're here and because I'm able to reach this place in dreams. I always dream vividly and often imagine myself living other lives, experiencing things with somebody else's perceptions. But those dreams are nothing more than extensions of my imagination—a kind of sorting-out of things I know, or believe to be true. Except for what happens here beyond the Lazarus Gate, I can never be certain that what I experience in dreams has any basis in reality."

"You can be anyone you want to be."

"I can *imagine* myself as anyone."

Sharon is silent for a long time. "I want to be with you, Veil," she says at last. "I want to be with you back there—wherever 'back there' is. The other reality."

"You will be."

"I love you, Veil."

"And I love you," Veil says as he embraces Sharon, then rolls away from the dream into deep sleep.

Chapter Two

The short, stocky black running up East Sixty-ninth Street toward Fifth Avenue was holding Victor Raskolnikov's statue under his right arm and carrying one of the art dealer's African spears in his right hand. His white shirt was stained red over the area of his left shoulder, and that arm flopped limply as he ran.

Pushing aside his thoughts of Sharon Solow, Veil Kendry took the wrapped painting he was carrying from under his arm and set it down against a fire hydrant. He was about to angle across the street to intercept the runner when he heard a car door open and slam shut close by. He glanced to his right in time to see a gaunt, pockmarked man in a purple T-shirt and grease-stained chinos skip around a late-model black Pontiac and start across the street. Then he saw Veil watching him—and froze. He licked his lips as fear moved across his face like a ripple in water, then abruptly turned around and got back into his car. He turned on the engine and backed down the street in a screech of burning rubber.

Veil sprinted across the street and was loping easily ten

yards behind the injured, burdened man when he suddenly realized that the black did not intend to turn at the corner. "Jesus Christ," Veil muttered as he surged forward in a renewed burst of speed. He was only a step or two behind the runner, reaching out for the man's collar, when the black, without hesitation, sped under the red traffic signal and leapt off the curb into the alley of steel death that was Fifth Avenue at 8:50 on a summer Friday evening.

Veil almost stumbled into the traffic, but he broke his momentum by grabbing the pole supporting the traffic signal. He swung out over the pavement, then just managed to pull himself in toward the sidewalk as the side of a taxi brushed against his spine and a loose sliver of chrome caught and tore his shirt. An instant later there was a deafening cacophony of blaring horns and skidding tires, and then, like a discordant echo, the screeching of locked brakes and the crashing of colliding, crumpling metal. Headlights popped, glass shattered. The din slammed against Veil's senses like a physical blow as he spun away from the pole, then watched and waited for almost two minutes before the mammoth chain collision finally ground to a halt.

Now Veil stepped out into the street, carefully picking his way across what resembled a lava flow of broken machinery, vaulting locked bumpers and rolling over crumpled hoods as he searched for what he assumed must be the crushed, lifeless body of the black. But there was no body; somehow the man had made it safely across the street and into the dark green forest-gloom of Central Park.

Veil turned back and immediately went to the aid of an injured motorist in a nearby car. The woman had banged her head on the windshield and twisted her ankle, but did not appear to be seriously injured. Veil wrapped her in his light jacket, then moved on to look for others who might need help. Sirens wailed as police and ambulances converged on the scene from all directions. On Sixty-ninth, a police car's siren died with a loud *whoop* as two patrolmen

jumped out. Veil knew both of the men; one glared at him with open hostility, while the other offered a barely perceptible smile and nod, which Veil returned.

Openly displaying a friendly attitude toward Veil Kendry was not something a policeman in any of the five boroughs of New York City could afford to do without risk of career damage, Veil thought with vague amusement.

"Excuse me, sir."

Veil turned in the direction of the rich baritone voice and found himself looking into the dark brown eyes of an olive-complexioned, heavily muscled man dressed in a brown gabardine suit. "Yes?"

"Detective Vahanian," the man said, flashing a gold detective's shield. "What's your name, sir?"

"Veil Kendry."

The detective uttered a soft, almost imperceptible grunt of surprise. Shadows of uncertainty moved in the man's eyes, then were blinked away. "Did you see what happened here?"

"A man ran across the street against the light."

Vahanian looked out over the wreckage clogging the street and shook his head in disbelief. "How long ago?"

"Maybe twenty, twenty-five minutes," Veil replied as he glanced at his watch. "If you're also investigating a theft from the Raskolnikov Gallery, he's your man. He was carrying the idol they call the Nal-toon, and a spear he must have snatched off the wall."

"Obviously you read the papers."

"On occasion. Also, Victor Raskolnikov handles my work. I'm a painter. I know about the Nal-toon; it's been the bane of Victor's existence for the past two months. I don't think he'll ever handle another piece of primitive art."

"I wouldn't blame him. Where did this man go?"

"Into the park," Veil said, pointing across the street. "He was short, maybe five-five or six. Mid-twenties, black—but I don't think he was an American black. He had an Oriental cast to his features."

"It was almost dark twenty minutes ago."

"The streetlights were on."

"Just a minute," Vahanian said curtly, then turned and walked back to his unmarked car, which was parked up on the sidewalk. He spoke for a few moments into the car's two-way radio, then returned to Veil. By now, dozens of police cars, ambulances, and tow trucks had arrived at the scene. "Where do you live?" Vahanian continued as he removed a cheap ballpoint pen and small notepad from his inside breast pocket.

"Three eighty-five Grand. It's a loft on the Lower East side."

"How close were you to this man?"

"He was across the street, but I got a pretty good look at him. He was wearing a white shirt without a collar and dark slacks a size or two too big for him. He'd been injured—maybe shot—in the left shoulder, and it looked like he couldn't use the arm."

"Anything else?"

"No. It happened pretty quickly."

The detective replaced the pen and pad in his pocket, then studied Veil for a few moments. "You're very observant," he said, raising his eyebrows slightly. "It looks like you've earned your reputation."

"What reputation?" Veil asked carefully.

Vahanian shook his head. "It's not important."

"Victor Raskolnikov is a friend as well as my dealer. If there's a police line outside the gallery, I'd appreciate it if you'd take me past. I'd like to see if he's all right."

The detective nodded in the direction of his car. "I was going to ask you to come along, anyway. My partner may want to ask you some questions."

"Give me a minute. There's something—" Veil glanced down the sidewalk toward the fire hydrant where he had left his painting, and sighed with resignation.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Veil said, walking toward the detective's car.

Vahanian got in, turned on the engine. He backed off the sidewalk, made a tight turn, then made his way slowly back down Sixty-ninth, weaving through an obstacle

course of police cars and emergency vehicles. He pulled up on the sidewalk around the corner from the gallery, and Veil followed him through the throng that was gathered at the front and struggling for position in order to see in through the huge display window. There were audible gasps from some of the men and women. As they entered the building a helicoper flew overhead, heading for Central Park.

The long and narrow room inside the entrance—one of four display areas comprising the gallery—was filled with an eclectic mix of primitive art and modern paintings, including three of Veil's. At the end of the room, to the left of a vaulted archway leading to another area, the pedestal on which the Nal-toon had been displayed stood empty, like some wooden creature that had been decapitated. Victor Raskolnikov, impeccably dressed in a dark blue suit and gray silk vest, was standing in a pile of broken glass, steadying himself by leaning on the pedestal. Ashen-faced, obviously badly shaken, the portly Russian was trying hard not to look across the room to where the sagging corpse of a young, uniformed security guard was pinned to the wall by the long, razor-sharp head of an African ceremonial spear that had skewered the man's chest almost in the exact center; blood had spattered over one of Veil's paintings, hung to the left and slightly above the guard's head.

To Veil's right, a few yards inside the entrance, a huge, hulking man who he assumed was a detective was questioning a frail, trembling woman whom Veil judged to be in her mid- or late twenties. The man's back was to him, but he could see the woman's face—and she was clearly terrified. Her face was virtually bloodless, made to seem even whiter by the shimmering blue-black of her long hair and her large black eyes. She kept shaking her head, as if she were denying something. Occasionally a thin, tapered hand would brush away a strand of hair or pluck at her thin lower lip in a curiously birdlike motion.

The woman saw Vahanian, reached a trembling hand

out toward him. "Is Toby all right?" she asked in a quavering voice.

Vahanian turned to her, but before he could answer, the huge man took a step to his left and, like some tropical moon, eclipsed the woman from sight. The man's voice came across the room to Veil's ears as a low, slightly menacing rumble.

"Veil!" The Russian who was his friend and mentor lumbered like some circus bear down the length of the room, threw his thick arms around Veil, and kissed him on both cheeks. "God, I'm glad to see you here. This is a terrible, terrible thing."

Veil once again glanced over to where the hulking detective was questioning the woman. Something was wrong, he thought; he was becoming increasingly certain that the woman was terrified of the man, not the situation.

Vahanian walked over to the other man, and both detectives stepped aside and huddled for a whispered conference while the woman stared down at her feet and hugged herself, as if she were broken inside. Once, the big man looked back over his shoulder, and Veil found himself looking into a round, doughy face with small eyes that reminded him of two raisins lost in a pie; there seemed to be no light, no life, in them. Huge, gnarled hands closed into fists, then relaxed again. Veil held the man's gaze for a few moments, then abruptly turned to his friend.

"What happened, Victor?"

Raskolnikov spread his arms out to his sides in a gesture of helplessness. "I couldn't stop it, Veil. Everything just happened too quickly. Now this man I hired to guard the statue is dead."

"How did it happen?"

"The young woman over there came in with a young man. The man, he had a very strange look in his eyes—and he was looking at the statue from the moment he came in the door. He never said a word, just started walking straight toward the statue. The woman screamed and tried to stop him; she grabbed his arm and shouted at him in this funny language, like nothing I've ever heard

before—click! click! click! Very strange. The man just pushed her away, grabbed one of the spears off the wall, and used it to smash the glass case over the statue. He moved so fast that he caught Frank—the guard—by surprise. Frank yelled at the man to stop, and when he didn't, Frank kind of panicked, I guess. He drew his gun and fired—hit the man in the shoulder, I think. Then the man threw the spear at Frank. Veil, I've never seen anyone move that fast. One moment Frank was aiming and getting ready to fire again, and the next moment he was dead." The Russian paused, swallowed hard, then gestured toward the opposite wall without looking at it. "Like that."

"Your guard did hit the man, Victor. I saw him. He escaped into Central Park after causing the damnedest chain collision you've ever seen on Fifth. But they should have him soon. By now there'll be an army of cops beating the bushes for him, and they're using a helicopter. I just hope your statue isn't damaged."

"I don't give a damn about that statue!" Tears suddenly glistened in the art dealer's eyes. "I paid a lousy three thousand dollars for it. What's three thousand dollars—what's anything?—compared to a man's life? The newspapers sure as hell made a big stink about it, but they couldn't tell me what I should do with the damn thing. The police wouldn't take it off my hands because they said it was legally mine. The United Nations made a stink, too, but *they* wouldn't take it. If they took it, then they wouldn't have anything to make a stink about. I didn't want to sell it to just anyone, Veil, because I felt very deeply in my heart for that tribe. All I wanted was my money back, and that didn't seem unreasonable. Then this gangster business came up and the courts said I couldn't sell it to *anyone* until a complete investigation had been made, but the judges wouldn't take it off my hands, either. Hell, I figured I might as well keep the statue on display for the publicity value. But I didn't want the tribe to lose it to some thief, so I hired a guard to make certain it stayed safe until *somebody* told me what I was allowed to do with

it. I simply should have sent it back to the tribe in the beginning. Then I wouldn't be responsible for this man's death."

"Take it easy, Victor," Veil said evenly. "You aren't responsible for anything but being a very decent man caught in a bind and trying to find the right thing to do. You didn't fire a gun to protect a piece of wood, and you didn't throw the spear."

"Are you Veil Kendry?"

Veil turned to find the big man with the doughy face and dead, raisin eyes standing very close behind him. "I'm Kendry," he replied evenly.

"You've met Detective Vahanian," the big man said in a rumbling, phlegmy voice as he jerked a thumb in the general direction of the dark-complexioned man who was standing off to one side, trying not to look embarrassed. "I'm Detective Nagle. I understand you witnessed what went on up the street."

"Yes. As I told your partner—"

"I know what you told my partner, and I don't need to hear it again. You're the one who needs to be told something."

"You sound like a man with heavy things on his mind," Veil said in a neutral, flat tone. "Why don't you unload them?"

Nagle leaned even closer, to the point where his face was only inches from Veil's, and Veil could smell beer and garlic on the man's breath. "You've got a bad rep, Kendry," Nagle rumbled, planting the thick index finger of his right hand in the center of Veil's chest.

"Do I?"

"You do. For one thing, I hear that you have a habit of sticking your nose in police business. I hear you think you're a hotshot private investigator."

Veil considered pushing the finger away from his chest but instead stepped back. Nagle grunted with satisfaction.

"You'd better back off from me, pal."

"Am I to take it that you're feeling a bit cranky this evening, Detective Nagle?"

Nagle frowned. "I'm in a good mood, Kendry. You'd better hope you never see me in a bad one."

Veil glanced across the room to where the woman was staring at him, the expression on her face frozen somewhere between fear and amazement. "Look, Nagle," Veil said easily, "I don't know what your personal problems are, and I don't care."

"You watch how you talk to me, chief."

"You picked up wrong information somewhere. I'm not an investigator, private or otherwise. I'm a painter."

"You bet your smart ass you're not a PI. You've got no license. If you had, it would have been pulled long ago. The point is that you act as if you were a PI. You've had run-ins with cops all over this goddamn city, and cops most definitely do not like amateurs stepping on their toes. We've got more than enough bag ladies, bums, street jugglers, and street musicians; we don't need a street detective."

"From time to time I do a favor for a friend."

"You seem to have a lot of friends."

"Yeah. I make friends easily."

"I've even heard it said that you have friends in very high places in Washington, like in the CIA."

Veil resisted the impulse to laugh. "Well, you couldn't be more wrong about that. But you'd be surprised how many of those street people you mentioned need a friend to take care of business for them. Sometimes I take money; more often I accept goods or services. But I'm not a private investigator, and I've never pretended to be."

"Are you a bad-ass, Kendry? Some people say you're a bad-ass."

"I can't help what people say," Veil replied, casually turning his head to watch as a police photographer began snapping pictures of the corpse hanging on the wall.

"Let's cut through the bullshit, chief. The message I have for you is short and sweet: I'm a much bigger bad-ass than you are. I'm telling you to stay the fuck out of my way. I don't know what you're doing in the neighborhood, or if you have any connection with these other people. If

you do have a connection, it doesn't mean diddly-squat. If you're even *thinking* about poking your nose into this idol business, you think again. If you don't, it's possible you could lose whatever it is you do your thinking with. I don't want to see your face again. Got it, chief?"

"I hear what you're saying," Veil replied flatly, his face impassive as he stared back at the police detective.

"You carrying a gun?"

"I don't have a permit to carry a gun."

"That isn't what I asked you, chief," Nagle said tightly. "You just made a mistake. Turn your ass around and lean against that wall."

Veil did not move. "Are you trying to harass me, Nagle? I'm not a lawyer, but I can't think of any reasonable cause I've given you for searching me. I'd hate to see a lawsuit or a review board hearing keep you from your diligent pursuit of this case."

"You long-haired bastard!" Nagle reached for Veil, and suddenly lost all feeling in his right arm, below the elbow. Amazed, he looked down and saw that the other man, moving so quickly that the motion had been imperceptible, had gripped his arm and was pressing a thumb into a nerve inside the elbow.

"Excuse me, Detective Nagle," Veil said as he released the arm. "Are you all right? I thought you were going to fall."

Feeling slowly came back into Nagle's arm. The detective glanced down at his elbow, then back up at the man with the long blond hair and pale blue, gold-flecked eyes who stood before him. The man's face wore an expression of genuine concern—an act, for the eyes were absolutely cold and appraising.

Nagle roared with rage and swung a wild, roundhouse right fist at a head that was suddenly no longer there. An instant later he felt arms wrap themselves around his waist, fingers that felt like steel rods pressed into his solar plexus, and he doubled over with a gasp. But he did not fall; he could not fall. The powerful arms held him up while the fingers, hidden from view, continued to press

and knead, jab and squeeze, until sickness began to burn at the back of his throat. Veil's voice, soothing and solicitous, came from somewhere behind his right ear.

"Just relax, Nagle," Veil continued. "You'll be all right. Vahanian, you want to give me a hand here? I think your partner's just a little drunk; I smell booze on his breath. I hope he's not going to be sick."

Then the fingers were abruptly gone from his belly, the arms from around his waist. As if on cue and conspiring against him, his stomach churned and its contents splattered over the front of his jacket, slacks, and shoes. Then he fell forward. He tried to twist around, slipped, and sat down in the pool of vomit.

Veil stood over the soiled detective, waiting calmly. All activity in the gallery had stopped, and there was silence, broken only by Nagle's gasps, retching, and coughing. The police photographer, two morgue attendants, a patrolman, Vahanian, the woman, and the spectators beyond the plate-glass display window all gaped in astonishment. Raskolnikov kept shaking his head, as if the muscles in his neck had gone into spasm.

Finally Nagle stopped retching. He took a deep, shuddering breath, wiped away a trail of spittle that hung from his mouth, then unzipped his blue windbreaker and reached for his gun.

Raskolnikov grunted with alarm and started to step forward. Veil stopped his friend by planting a hand firmly on his chest, and by then Vahanian had stepped between Veil and Nagle. The stocky detective reached down and hauled his partner to his feet by the front of his jacket. Nagle's face was brick-red, the small eyes aflame now with rage, hatred, and humiliation. He lunged for Veil, but Vahanian—displaying amazing strength for a man at least seventy-five pounds lighter than his partner—managed to shove Nagle back against the wall, where he held him.

"Stop it, Carl!" Vahanian shouted. "You're losing it!"

Vahanian dropped his voice and, still holding the other man firmly against the wall, put his mouth close to Nagle's ear and spoke in a low murmur. Veil, his ears

trained two decades before to pick out sounds of life and death from a cacophony of jungle noises, could make out just a few words and phrases.

". . . witnesses . . . got you on the drinking . . . not worth the trouble . . ."

Gradually Nagle stopped struggling, although his face remained the color of flame. Vahanian, careful to keep his right hand pressed against Nagle's chest, turned to face Veil. For a fleeting moment something that might have been respect flickered in his dark eyes, then was gone, replaced by the cold, hostile glint of a cop staring at an outlaw.

"I hope you appreciate the size of the pass you're getting on this one, Kendry."

"Oh, I certainly do. I certainly hope Detective Nagle is feeling better soon."

"Shut up!" Vahanian snapped. "Now you're pressing your luck with me! What I'm saying is that this is a once-in-a-lifetime pass you'll never get again." He took a deep breath, continued in a calmer voice, "We've got your statements, names, and addresses. If we have more questions, we'll know where to get in touch with you."

Nagle had gotten his second wind. Suddenly he bellowed and tried to run through Vahanian to get at Veil. Like an outweighed but fiercely determined offensive lineman, Vahanian blocked Nagle with his forearms, put his head down, and drove with his legs, pushing the bigger man toward the exit. A uniformed officer, barely able to suppress a grin, hurriedly opened the door. The crowd that had gathered outside quickly split, and Vahanian pushed Nagle out and into a car parked on the sidewalk. A few moments later Vahanian was behind the wheel, and the car shot out of sight with a squeal of spinning rubber.

Inside the gallery, the photographer finished his work. The morgue attendants removed the body from the wall, slid it into a plastic bag.

"My God, Veil," Raskolnikov breathed in a quavering voice. "What did you do to him?"

Veil looked at his friend, smiled. "Just helping a police officer—"

"You are crazy, my friend. You know that."

"—who became ill while performing his duty."

"What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I was on my way to get your opinion on one of my latest pieces."

"You have a painting with you?"

"I did have; somebody stole it. Just a minute, Victor."

Veil walked across the room to the woman who was standing absolutely still and looking profoundly forlorn, like some fragile piece of living sculpture that had been abandoned to the elements of confusion, fear, and panic and was in danger of shattering. She was a wounded woman, Veil thought. A man crucified on a wall by a spear was not the first horrible scene she had witnessed.

"I'm Veil Kendry," he said softly, looking directly into the large, liquid eyes and smiling gently. "The man who stole the idol is a friend of yours, isn't he?"

The woman swallowed and blinked; her eyes slowly came into focus on Veil's face, and the spare movement of her head was in direct contrast to the desperate, naked plea in her eyes.

"He's all right, at least for the time being," Veil continued. "The last time I saw him, he was disappearing into Central Park."

"But he'd been shot. . . ." The woman's voice was faint and breathy, as frail as her body.

"A shoulder wound and, judging by the way he was moving, not too serious. The cops probably have him by now, so he may already be on the way to a hospital."

The woman's eyes were the most expressive Veil had ever seen, and what they flashed now was relief. Her lips managed to form a shaky, tentative smile, and then she abruptly turned her head away, as if to hide whatever else might show in her eyes.

"I'm Reyna Alexander," the woman said, her voice muffled slightly by the thick strand of hair that had fallen across the side of her face. "Thank you for telling me that."

"You're welcome. I'd say you need a drink."

The woman shook her head. "I don't drink."

"Tea, then. Victor brews the strongest pot of tea this side of the Urals." Veil paused, then continued seriously. "You need something strong in you, Reyna. You need time to wind down."

"No. I just want to go home."

"Is anyone there?"

"No."

"Then I don't think that's a good idea—not for a while, anyway. You're suffering from shock."

"I want to go home."

"Where do you live?"

"Wesley Missionary College."

"How did you get here?"

"I have a car."

"Then I'll drive you. I know where the college is; I only live a few blocks from there. You don't have to be afraid. I'm quite harmless."

Now the woman looked at him again; there was a new emotion reflected in her eyes that Veil could not read. "That's not true. You're a very dangerous man; I could feel that all the way across the room. And you must be insane to talk that way, and do whatever it was you did, to Carl Nagle."

"That seems to be the consensus of opinion. You sound as though you speak from experience."

Fear shimmered across the surface of the black eyes. The woman pressed her lips tightly together and shook her head. "I don't know what you mean."

"I'm not dangerous to you."

Reyna Alexander studied him for a few moments, then nodded her head. "I know that, Mr. Kendry. And I would appreciate it if you'd take me home. Thank you."

CHAPTER THREE

Because of the chain collision on Fifth Avenue, most of the avenues and cross streets around midtown were jammed. Veil drove east on Sixty-eighth to the FDR Drive, then turned south and headed downtown toward the tip of Manhattan. A full moon was rising over the East River.

Reyna Alexander had turned on the radio the moment they'd gotten into the '79 brown Buick, then tuned it to one of the city's all-news stations. The theft of the Naltoon, the killing of the security guard, and the traffic tie-up were the lead items, but there were no details on who had stolen the idol or why. Nor was there any indication that the thief had been captured, despite the helicopter and the large numbers of policemen dispatched to the scene.

"He's K'ung, isn't he?" Veil asked casually as he maneuvered around a car that had stalled in the center lane.

Reyna glanced over at Veil and was obviously surprised. "You pronounce that remarkably well."

"I heard it pronounced that way on television a few

weeks ago, when the story first started to break. I have a fairly good ear for languages."

"So do a lot of other people, but I'm the only person in the northeast I know of who speaks K'ung—and you're the first person I've heard even come close to pronouncing the tribe's name correctly. Where did you learn to make the glottal sound?"

Veil thought about it, then decided that mentioning work with tribes in Southeast Asia would only lead to questions he could not—was not permitted to—answer. There were men in Washington who were extremely displeased by what they considered the high profile he had developed in New York. Orville Madison in particular was displeased, Veil thought, and that was dangerous. It did not matter what he did for this man or how often he did it; he was still under sentence of death. That had been made clear to him at the time when he had bartered his soul for Sharon's life.

"It doesn't matter," Veil replied evenly. "Am I right about him being K'ung?"

Reyna abruptly turned off the radio, looked at Veil, and nodded. "Yes. His name's Tobal'ak. I call him Toby. He's the chief's son—a prince." She paused, smiled wryly. "He's also the toughest kid in the rather large block known as the Kalahari Desert. The fools!"

Veil glanced sideways at the woman. There was sorrow and anxiety reflected in her eyes, but the rest of her face was clenched in anger. "Who are fools?" he asked quietly.

Reyna shook her head. "I shouldn't have said that. It's not their fault; all they could see was need, not consequences. I don't want to talk about it."

Veil waited a few minutes. He eased right in order to exit on Houston Street, then gently pressed the woman. "What was this Toby doing here? And why the secrecy? After all the publicity about the Nal-toon and the plight of the tribe it was stolen from, I would have thought that the arrival of a K'ung prince in New York City would have rated headlines. I never heard or read anything about him coming here."

Reyna made a sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "Toby's only been here two hours, and I only found out he was coming a little over three hours ago. I'm afraid I didn't have much time to call a press conference."

Again, sensing that the woman badly wanted to talk but could not be pressed further, Veil drove in silence. Finally Reyna sighed, leaned back in the passenger's seat, and rested her head against the window. When she spoke, her voice, muffled by the glass, was so faint that Veil had to strain to hear her over the hum of the engine.

"Obviously you've been following the story."

"Yes. Also, Victor Raskolnikov is a friend. I don't have to tell you how much trouble that idol has caused for him, which means that I took a rather personal interest."

"Still . . . Are you religious, Mr. Kendry?"

"No, but I think I appreciate the importance of religion in a lot of people's lives."

Reyna shook her head. "This is different. No matter how much you've read, and no matter how sensitive you may be, there's just no way you can appreciate how important the Nal-toon is to the K'ung. I spent years with that tribe—my parents were the first missionaries to make contact with that particular group, which is probably the most reclusive, isolated tribe in the Kalahari. Then I went back later as a missionary student working for my degree in anthropology. If any outsider could truly understand what the Nal-toon means to that tribe, you'd think it would be me. Wrong. I thought I did, but it wasn't until the Nal-toon was stolen and the entire social fabric of the tribe began to unravel that I fully began to sense the real depths of that meaning. To say that an idol *is* God to a people is one thing; to understand it in one's heart and mind is another. The Nal-toon isn't a symbol to the K'ung. The Nal-toon, the wood itself, *is* God, the only God, and He is their personal guest. God lives with them, watches over them, and He has given them the desert and everything in it.

"The Nal-toon is—was—their peace and happiness, and

their reason for living. They couldn't understand how God could be stolen; before the Nal-toon was taken, the K'ung had no concept of thievery. Now they're robbing each other blind—food, water, weapons, women. There's no longer any reason not to. After all, how could God allow Himself to be stolen? To the K'ung, God had abandoned them. The foundation of their daily lives had been blown away, and so they fell into a bottomless hole of hopelessness and meaninglessness—and they're still falling; they'll keep falling until finally the tribe destroys itself or the Nal-toon is returned to them. It's as if, in this country, God had been officially pronounced dead on the same day that all laws were repealed and all the police went home. Anarchy."

"I may not appreciate the full impact of their loss," Veil replied quietly, "but I think I understand something about hopelessness and suffering. The tribe's pain was made very clear in Berg's series of articles."

"God bless Alan Berg," Reyna said with feeling. "To think that a Jew would go to all that trouble for a tribe of primitive bushmen . . ."

Veil smiled wryly. "Why is that any more surprising than the fact that a bunch of conservative Christian missionaries would traipse around the desert for more than twenty years with the same group of absolutely recalcitrant idol-worshipers? Isn't compassion what religion—any religion—should be all about?"

Reyna raised her head from the window, turned, and looked at him. "Of course," she said tightly. "That was a stupid thing for me to say. Forgive me."

Veil shrugged as he exited from the FDR and turned right onto Houston Street. Here there was heavy Friday night traffic, and he purposely slowed. He was afraid that Reyna would stop talking once they reached the missionary college, and he wanted to hear what else she had to say about the warrior-prince who was—apparently—holed up somewhere in Central Park.

"Berg's a very good man," Veil said in a low monotone intended not to disturb the anthropologist's distant,

thoughtful mood. "He's also a great reporter—and incredibly lucky. He picked up the missionaries' pleas over the shortwave at *The Times*'s bureau in Johannesburg. He must have smelled a good story, because he hired a helicopter and went out into the desert himself to look into it. What he found was a special kind of horror—what had once been a proud tribe of hunter-gatherers had been reduced to squatting around in their own filth, stealing from each other, and subsisting entirely on emergency helicopter drops of food and medical supplies from South Africa and Botswana.

"Then Berg went to work. He hit every trading center on the perimeter of the Kalahari; the Nal-toon is a pretty distinctive piece of sculpture, so he reasoned that anyone who'd seen it would remember. Somebody did. He found a white hunter in Molepolole who'd bought it from a Bantu for the equivalent of a few dollars. The hunter, in turn, had sold it to a wholesaler who specialized in supplying primitive art for the markets in Europe and the United States.

"Then the trail disappeared when the wholesaler absolutely refused to say who he'd sold the statue to. But Berg kept digging and asking questions, and he picked up the trail again; it led straight underground into a smuggling pipeline used by organized crime. Nobody knows how, or why, the Nal-toon got into that pipeline, but once it did, its uniqueness made it relatively easy for Berg to track. And he tracked it right into Victor's gallery; Victor had bought it for three thousand dollars at a wholesalers' auction, and it came complete with a legal import certificate. Then Berg began writing his articles. He'd done an astonishing piece of investigative reporting, and he's bound to win a Pulitzer for it."

"While the K'ung starve and die," Reyna responded bitterly. "And they'll keep dying, one by one, unless they get their god back."

"I haven't forgotten that," Veil said evenly as he approached one of the two entrance gates leading onto the campus of Wesley Missionary College, a peaceful enclave

comprised of several wooden buildings and well-manicured lawns spread out over a small, fenced-in area just south of Washington Square. "I'm sorry if I sounded insensitive."

The guard at the gate recognized Reyna and waved Veil through. Following Reyna's directions, he drove slowly through a network of narrow streets that were brightly illuminated by mercury-vapor lamps. He pulled over to the curb in front of a dormitory-style building, turned off the engine, and handed the car keys to Reyna.

"I should drive you home," Reyna said softly. She made no move to get out of the car.

"Not necessary. I told you that I only live a few blocks from here, down on Grand. With this traffic I'll probably get there faster if I walk."

"Thank you again."

"You're welcome." Veil opened the door on his side and started to get out. When he felt the woman's soft touch on his arm, he slid back in and closed the door.

"Toby was sent here as a goofy publicity stunt," Reyna said with a sigh. She hesitated, shook her head. "No! It's just not fair to say that. Floyd and Wilbur were desperate, and they thought they were doing the right thing."

"I take it that Floyd and Wilbur are the fools you mentioned."

Reyna nodded. "Floyd Rogers and Wilbur Mead. They're not fools, Mr. Kendry, but they are old—and they're senile. They also happen to be homosexual; that's neither here nor there, except to the Missionary Society, of course, but it does explain why the Missionary Society chose to leave two old men whose judgment is faltering buried in the desert for twelve years. They were an embarrassment.

"Anyway, while we were reading about the plight of the K'ung, Floyd and Wilbur were living it. When the Nal-toon became a political football in the United Nations and was tied up legally because of the organized-crime connection, Floyd and Wilbur panicked. They came up with a scheme for arousing public outrage and bringing pressure

to bear for the return of the idol; they would send a spokesman from the tribe to make a kind of personal appeal. They knew that the Missionary Society would never approve, so they never bothered to ask for approval; and they never bothered to tell anyone over here. As I understand it, they went to Alan Berg and got his cooperation. It was Berg who arranged to get travel documents for Toby. Together they took this twenty-five-year-old man who had never been out of the Kalahari to Molepolole, outfitted him in a suit of clothes, got a flight attendant to agree to keep an eye on him until they landed at Kennedy Airport, and put him on the plane. *Then* they called me at the college."

"You wouldn't have approved, either?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Maybe if there'd been more time to arrange—"

"No way. But I was an absolutely essential part of their plan because I know Toby, and I'm the only one around who speaks K'ung. Floyd and Wilbur knew I'd hide out on a mountaintop in Alaska before I'd ever agree to this insanity, assuming I was given a choice. So they made sure I wasn't given a choice. Once Toby was in the air, the plan had become a *fait accompli*. They knew I wouldn't abandon him."

"Why didn't you take someone with you to the airport?"

"Who?" Reyna asked with a sharp, bitter laugh. "I knew that Toby was going to be spooked enough without having to deal with a stranger. Also, I was very pressed for time. The overseas trunk lines were jammed, and I only got the call barely an hour before Toby's plane was due to land. I figured that the best way to handle the situation was to pick up Toby alone, reassure him that everything was going to be fine, put him up at the college overnight, then pack him off on the first Africa-bound plane leaving in the morning."

"Forgive me for asking, Miss Alexander—"

"My name's Reyna."

"And I'm Veil. Reyna, why did you take him to the gallery? You must have known it would be dangerous."

"I knew," Reyna replied, bowing her head slightly. "I felt I had no choice. The moment Toby got off the plane, I could see that he was full of shilluk."

"Shilluk?"

"It's a kind of combination narcotic-hallucinogenic drug. The K'ung make it by boiling down the sap of a certain cactus. Anyway, Toby had dosed himself to the eyeballs, which was going to make him even harder to handle. We no sooner got in the car than he demanded to see the Nal-toon. With all of the thousands of sights, sounds, and smells that he was experiencing for the first time, the only thing that interested him was seeing his god—immediately. And he wouldn't be put off until the morning. He wanted to see it at once, and when I said that we couldn't, he opened the car door and started to get out. We were on the Van Wyck Expressway, going fifty-five, at the time. The only way I could control him was to agree to take him to see the Nal-toon."

"Did you explain to him that the Nal-toon had to stay where it was?"

"Of course. I even lied to him—something I'd never done—and told him that we might be able to get the Nal-toon the next day. I was in a no-win situation, and I decided that the only way to keep him from hurting himself, or someone else, was to take him to the gallery so he could see for himself that his god was safe. It was a terrible mistake, obviously, and one I'll pay for, for the rest of my life. Because of me, a man is dead."

"No, not because of you. A properly trained guard never would have fired his gun in that situation. It seems clear that all your friend wanted was the idol; he threw the spear only after he was attacked."

"Still . . ."

"It's not difficult to understand why you felt you had to do what you did. I can also understand Toby's feelings, if not his behavior. Doped-up or not, he must have had some realization of how futile it would be to try to steal the statue and run away like he did. He got incredibly lucky twice; he wasn't squashed on Fifth Avenue, and Central

Park happened to be across the street. What on earth did he think he was going to accomplish?"

Reyna was silent for some time. When she did speak, it was not to respond to Veil's question. "There are no villains in this, only victims."

"Reyna, I know that you're physically and emotionally exhausted. I don't want to butt into your business, but I'd think that you'd want to be around when they bring your friend out of the park. I know the police would certainly appreciate it. Toby will be terrified and terribly alone without you; you, at least, can talk to him. Indeed, you're the *only* person in the city who can talk to him."

"There's no need, Veil," Reyna said distantly. "Not tonight."

"I don't understand."

Reyna put the keys in the ignition and turned it on. Then she turned on the radio. It took a few minutes for the news sequence about the stolen idol to be repeated, but when it was, there was nothing new to report: The K'ung warrior-prince had not yet been captured.

"Nobody goes to ground like a K'ung," Reyna said simply as she turned off the radio, removed the keys from the ignition, and put them in her purse. Then she got out of the car.

Veil got out, walked around the car, and started up the sidewalk after the woman. Reyna turned and waited for him. She was trembling slightly, but her voice was steady.

"Thank you again, Veil—for the ride, and for your understanding."

"Are you sure you're all right?"

Reyna nodded, then dropped her gaze and suddenly began to tremble. "Veil, there's something I have to say to you."

Veil reached out to grip Reyna's shoulders, but the woman shook her head and moved back a step.

"What is it, Reyna?"

"That . . . man . . ."

"What man? The detective? Nagle?"

Reyna nodded. "I don't know what you did to him, or how you did it. I've never seen anyone . . ."

"You know this creep, don't you? What happened between you and him?"

"He'll never forget what you did," Reyna said quickly, still refusing to meet Veil's gaze. "You have to watch out for him. He's more dangerous than you can ever know. He'll kill you if you get in his way, Veil; he may decide to kill you, anyway. You may not believe that a policeman would do that—or that he could do it and get away with it. Carl Nagle can. Nobody can stop him. I'm telling you this because I know you're a kind man, and I don't want that man to hurt you."

"Reyna, I want you to tell me about Carl Nagle."

But Reyna had already spun around and was running up the sidewalk toward the three-story, wood-framed dormitory. Veil waited until she was safely inside, then turned and walked back the way he had come. A light rain had begun to fall.

• • •

Veil found Victor Raskolnikov's black, chauffeured limousine outside the brick building where his loft was located. Veil opened the back door and slid into the luxurious, leather-scented interior.

"You're wet." The Russian's voice was steady, but his face was still ashen.

"Yeah."

Raskolnikov used the ivory handle of his walking cane to press a button on the ceiling; a bar revolved out of the seat back. "Scotch, of course."

"A big one, Victor. No ice. Thanks."

The art dealer poured the drink, handed the tumbler to Veil. "How's the girl?"

"Upset, of course, but she'll be all right."

"Well, she's not the only one who's upset. How do you feel about the possibility of crossing that detective's path again?"

"Why?"

"I'd like you to do some work for me. Nobody in the city has the range of contacts and sources of information that you do. I've been slandered by the United Nations, jerked around by the courts and police, and generally hassled since the beginning of this damn idol business. Because the freedom to make my own decisions was taken away from me, I find I am responsible for a young man's death."

"Victor—"

"I'm sorry, Veil, but I do feel responsible. Now I am thinking that I want to do something about it, although I'm not sure what. I do know that I would like to be kept informed of what is happening."

"You'll be able to read about it in the papers."

"Not everything gets into the papers. In any case, I have a strong feeling about this idol and the young man who stole it."

"The idol was originally stolen from his tribe, Victor," Veil said quietly. "He was just trying to get it back."

"You are right, of course, and that is why I have a strong feeling. I just want you to keep your ear to the ground. If you hear nothing special, so be it."

"I was going to keep an eye on things, anyway, Victor, and I'll certainly keep you informed. I have a strong feeling too."

"Well, now you'll be paid for your trouble."

"Victor, I can never repay you for what you've done for me."

"Nonsense. I make money off your talents. You are a fine artist and getting better. The Raskolnikov Galleries are not exactly a philanthropic organization. I have done very well with your dream-paintings, and I will do even better in the future as you become better known. In fact, I take great pride in the fact that I discovered you. Now I am asking you to use your, uh, darker skills on my behalf. Do you need money?"

"No. I'm still living off what you got for me on my last two paintings."

"Then I will at least pay you for the painting that was

stolen. After all, it was stolen while you were trying to get back the idol."

"No."

"All right, my friend," Raskolnikov said resignedly, tapping his cane on the floor. "I know better than to argue with you. We will decide later what payment you will take. Cash or barter—either is fine with me."

Veil drained his glass, then set it down on the mahogany bar shelf. "Thanks again for the drink, Victor," he said as he opened the door and got out.

"You will be careful!"

"Sure. I'll be in touch. Right now I'm going to get some sleep."

"Veil! You watch out for this Nagle fellow, huh? I have a very strong feeling about him, too, and it's a bad one. I know that you'd eat him for breakfast one-on-one, but he's a cop and he has friends. They have guns."

"Good night, Victor."

Chapter Four

Veil dreams.

Floating in a bodiless dream state through the Kalahari night, he watches as a tall Bantu crawls slowly and silently, like some great black desert lizard, to the crest of a steep star dune and peers over its spine. Below, in the dune's trough, the huge fire that had painted the sky an hour before is dying, reduced to a broad grid of glowing embers that pulse like a breathing creature in the desert wind just beginning to rise from the north.

The man can tell from the layout of this camp that it is K'ung, not Bantu, and he knows that not even the presence of Christian missionaries—indicated by the Land-Rover parked on the lee side of a smaller dune to the west—will guarantee him a welcome. Missionaries or no, the man knows that he may be killed if he hails the camp; at the least he will probably be beaten, then stripped of the precious medicinal herbs he has spent the last six days gathering in the open desert.

The man inches backward, then abruptly freezes as a strong puff of wind causes the bed of coals below him to

flare briefly. In that instant the man glimpses something a short distance from the fire that causes him to grunt softly with surprise and intense interest.

A wooden statue, perhaps half-a-man high, rests on a flat, hard-packed bed of sand.

This is not just any K'ung tribe, the Bantu thinks as darkness once again washes over the statue in the wake of the passing wind. It has to be the small band of which stories are told, the Lonely Ones of the deep desert with their strange, unshakable beliefs—and strange missionaries that other missionaries make jokes about. The statue must be the Nal-toon, the idol this tribe believes to be the Maker and Protector of all things.

Theirs is a silly faith, the man thinks. For almost three years he has been a Christian, a believer in the Jesus-God, Who is invisible. Unlike the Nal-toon, the Jesus-God cannot be stolen, burned, or harmed in any way. The Jesus-God is the mightiest warrior of all and does not have to be guarded by anyone who might fall asleep—as the K'ung warrior the man has glimpsed sprawled on the sand near the idol has done.

The man's lips draw back in a sly smile. Obviously, he thinks, the sleeping man is not the legendary Tobal'ak, about whom so many fantastic stories are told. Tobal'ak, it is said, does not require sleep like ordinary men, and he is never far from the Nal-toon.

The Bantu rests his forehead on the night-cool sand, breathing deeply and regularly as he tries to weigh the risks and consequences of a failed attempt to steal the idol against the certain rewards that success will bring. He knows he will be killed if he is caught. But who will catch him? Tobal'ak? The man does not believe all the stories that are told about the K'ung warrior—indeed, he is not even sure he believes there is such a warrior as Tobal'ak, any more than he believes that the Nal-toon is anything but an ugly piece of carved wood.

On the other hand, the man knows that the idol will be worth a great deal to the white hunters who regularly pass through the Bantu camps at the edge of the jungle looking

for such objects, which, it is said, are sold to other tribes in faraway places. An object as large as the Nal-toon should be worth many steel knives, the man thinks, as well as a large pouch of matches. He may even ask for the most precious gift of all—a radio like the missionaries carry.

The Bantu makes his decision. He rises, picks up his bundle of herbs, and moves stealthily along the spine of the dune until he is directly above the Nal-toon and its sleeping guard, upwind of any dogs that may be in the camp. He puts his bundle down, then slides silently down the inner face of one of the radiating arms of the dune. He puts his hands out to his sides and brakes to a stop as he comes abreast of the idol. He waits for a time, pressing back against the sand and listening in the darkness. However, there are no sounds of alarm, and the guard continues to sleep.

Then, in an unbroken series of smooth and silent movements, the man reaches over the spine of the radiating arm, seizes the idol with both hands, then starts back up the face of the dune. The Nal-toon is much heavier than the man thought it would be, and he finds himself clumsily plowing in the sand, driving with his legs and gasping for breath. But he makes it back to the top of the dune safely.

Standing on top of the dune, the Bantu's lips curl back from his teeth in a contemptuous sneer as he looks down on the sleeping camp. The K'ung—at least this tribe of K'ung—are like children, he thinks. If this piece of wood is their only god, as he has been told it is, they should have taken more care in guarding it.

Suddenly he feels the curious, empty feeling in his stomach, which the missionaries have told him is guilt. The man knows that, as a Christian, he is not supposed to steal—not even from his enemies. But he reminds himself that he has not been a Christian for very long and thus cannot be expected to follow all the many rules which have been laid down for him by the missionaries. Also, he has been told that the Jesus-God will always forgive him, as long as he is sorry.

And he is truly sorry, the Bantu thinks; he would not have stolen this tribal god were it not for the fact that he wants knives, matches—and maybe a radio.

The Bantu hefts the idol under his arm, slides his carrying sling over his shoulder, and starts toward the north, leaning into the wind that swirls around him and quickly erases the evidence of his passage.

Veil leaves the man's mind and rolls away from the dream to another, to be with Sharon.

Chapter Five

Veil was up before dawn. He ate a breakfast of black coffee, cheese, and bread as he listened to the news. Toby had not been found, and the police dragnet had now shifted to a systematic search of abandoned buildings, alleys, and unused storefronts on both the East and West Sides. By six-thirty, Veil was entering Central Park at Sixty-ninth Street, retracing the steps of the K'ung warrior-prince.

Nobody goes to ground like a K'ung warrior.

He did not bother looking for signs where Toby had gone in, for he knew that any spoor would have been obliterated—first by the feet of police officers—and later by reporters and the curious. Instead he walked straight ahead, glancing to his left and right, studying the general terrain and looking for the most likely escape route for a fleeing bushman to take.

Veil smiled thinly and shook his head at the thought of how preposterous was the thing he was trying to do. He hadn't done any tracking in more than seventeen years, and in the jungles of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia he had

been tracking Viet Cong and Pathet Lao, whose sandals left the distinct imprint of tire tread. Here he was in Central Park—an area larger than some countries, used every day by thousands of people wearing everything from sneakers to combat boots. Toby, Veil thought, could be anywhere; he could even be where the police thought he was, cowering in some rat-infested basement. But Veil did not think so.

Nobody goes to ground like a K'ung warrior.

He kept walking in a straight line, down into a grassy bowl ringed by trees. Despite the early hour, lovers on their blankets were already—or maybe still—at each other, and joggers of every shape glided or huffed along. Veil ducked when someone shouted a warning and a purple Frisbee sailed just over his head.

Tracking the K'ung had been a great idea, Veil thought as he climbed halfway up the opposite face of the bowl, turned, and sat down on the grass. It was just impossible to execute.

Then he saw Reyna Alexander come crawling on her hands and knees out of the trees directly across the way. The anthropologist wore jeans, sneakers, and a long-sleeved cotton blouse. Her long, blue-black hair was tied back in a ponytail that flowed like an ink stain across her back as, oblivious to the startled and curious stares of lovers, joggers, and Frisbee players, she slowly crawled fifteen feet out onto the grass, then stopped before a small patch of bare ground. After almost a minute of staring at the ground she rose, brushed grass and dirt off her jeans, then headed back into the wooded area.

Anyone who even presumed to track someone else through Central Park had to be good, Veil thought, and he sensed that the frail woman was, indeed, very good. He was about to rise and follow her when he realized that he was not the only one with that idea. He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye, looked across the bowl to his right, and saw a man in tan chinos and a red tank top appear to wave at him. Then the man passed the edge of his hand across his throat. A moment later a man rushed past from behind, brushing Veil's shoulder. The

man—squat, balding, and wearing a pair of plaid Bermuda shorts with matching shirt—was clumsily trying to stuff a pair of binoculars back into a leather case as he ran. The men joined up on the sidewalk, then entered the wooded area. Veil rose and ran down the hill.

Like a brother to the night that had just passed, Veil slipped silently into the trees, perhaps twenty yards from where Reyna, and then the men, had entered. He had no trouble following the sound trail of cracking branches and muttered curses of the men ahead of him, and Veil followed, gliding from tree to tree through the shadows.

The two men stopped for a few moments to have a whispered conference, then moved to their left. Veil did the same, moving parallel to the men, and was twenty-five yards behind them when they emerged from the trees and onto a large expanse of rolling lawn.

Reyna's ebony-crowned head was just disappearing over the crest of another knoll. The two men hurried after Reyna, and Veil followed them.

Strung out over almost a quarter mile, the procession crossed the East Drive. Reyna angled in the direction of the zoo, walked another hundred yards, then once again dropped to her hands and knees on the perimeter of a large patch of bare ground. The two men stopped. Veil stopped, lay down on his back, and watched over the top of his crossed ankles.

Reyna raised little clouds of dust as she slowly crawled forward on the dirt, head very close to the ground. She rose when she reached the other side, cupped her hands to her mouth, and uttered a strange, guttural cry that carried clearly across the meadow, startling a flock of pigeons at the same time as it caused a jogger to glance up sharply, stumble, and fall.

Then Reyna began walking quickly to her left, disappearing into another wooded area. The two men exchanged a few words, then hurried after her. Veil, remembering the throat-cutting gesture the thinner man had made, sprang to his feet and ran after them.

He found Reyna and the two men thirty yards inside the

line of trees, behind the thick trunk of an ancient oak. Any concern Veil might have had about the men being police was instantly dispelled: the man in the Bermuda shorts was trying to drag a struggling Reyna to the ground, while the man in the tank top waited, switchblade in hand. Veil took the man with the knife first, hitting him with a powerful side kick in the solar plexus that sat him down hard on the ground, knife still in his hand. His face turned purple, and his eyes bulged as his mouth gaped open and his chest heaved in a desperate, silent plea for air that simply would not enter his lungs. In a continuation of the same motion Veil spun around and smashed the flat of his hand into the other man's face with enough force to crush the man's nose and snap off his front teeth. The squat man keeled over backward, unconscious.

"Excuse me," Veil said with a wink to the white-faced, astonished Reyna as he grabbed the man in the tank top by the hair and pulled him behind a clump of brush. "I'll be right back."

Veil took the switchblade from the gasping man's hand, pushed him on his back, then straddled him. "Let's chat," he said in a flat voice as he tested the sharpness of the blade against the thickness of the hairs on the man's bare left shoulder.

"Gaa . . . gaa . . ."

Dissatisfied with the switchblade, Veil sank its tip into the trunk of a tree just behind the man's head and snapped off the blade. Then he reached down inside his boot and withdrew one of his most prized possessions—a short dagger with a blade made of the rarest Damascus steel, a gift taken in barter from a knife maker on Staten Island for whom Veil had performed a service three years before.

"Are . . . you a . . . cop?" the man managed to say.

"You should be so lucky." Veil pulled up the edge of the man's T-shirt and slit it from waist to neck; there was virtually no tug at all on the blade, and the cotton parted with a soft whisper. "That was to get your attention. If you don't give me the right answers, I cut you next. Who hired you to follow the girl?"

The man, still struggling to draw a full breath, stared

wide-eyed at the man with the long yellow hair and glacial-blue, gold-flecked eyes who was holding the tip of his knife just above the man's sternum. "A guy by the name of Picker Crabbe," he muttered hoarsely, licking his lips. "He's—"

"I know Picker. How much is he paying you?"

"A grand each if we brought him the statue the guy stole last night. Picker said that the girl was a friend of this guy, and she might lead us to him."

"She couldn't lead you to anybody after you jumped her. Why the hell did you do that?"

"Who the hell are you?"

Without hesitation Veil flicked his wrist, opening a three-inch gash just below the man's right nipple. Blood welled in the slit, rolled down the man's side. The man started to yell, but Veil clapped his hand over the open mouth, then held the tip of the knife against the man's throat. The man rolled his eyes and shook his head. Veil took his hand away and repeated the question. His voice was flat—absolutely devoid of emotion, implacable.

"She moves like a ghost," the man answered in a voice quivering with terror. Ignoring the knife now, he stared up at Veil as if he were looking at an angel of death. "We lost her for almost twenty minutes a while back. We didn't want to take a chance on losing her for good, so we decided to grab her and force her to tell us what she knew."

"You're idiots twice over. Picker's got a hole in his nose; every cent he can get his hands on goes for coke. Where in hell did you think he was going to get two thousand dollars to pay you?"

"He swore he could get the money. I think he was taking orders from someone else."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"Take a guess."

"I really don't *know*, man! Hey, my partner and me just do odd jobs—things we pick up on the streets. Nothing else was happening, so we took this. Besides, if we had

gotten our hands on the statue, we wouldn't have given it to Picker until he gave us the money. We ain't that stupid."

"Why shouldn't Picker do the job himself and pocket the two grand if he got lucky?"

The man laughed nervously. "Hey, man, I don't know. Maybe Picker was afraid you'd be around."

The man was joking, Veil thought, but what he'd said could well be the truth. It was also true that the two men were nothing but low-level street thugs, "odd-job men." No one else would be working for Picker Crabbe. Veil clipped the man on the jaw with the heel of his left hand, then rose and walked from behind the brush to where Reyna waited. Her mouth was still slightly open, and she was staring at him dumbfounded.

"Good morning," Veil said, taking the woman by the hand and leading her out of the copse of trees. "Let's go get some coffee."

• • •

"Who were they, Veil?"

"Munchkins. Two very stupid street thugs working for another very stupid street thug. The man, or men, pulling their strings may not be so stupid, though. There are some nasty criminal types in the city who are definitely not art collectors but who want the Nal-toon. Do you have any idea why?"

Reyna sipped at her black coffee and grimaced. "Maybe they want to sell it?"

"No. Victor told me that the idol is worth only a few thousand dollars at most, and then only to a select clientele that collects primitive art. The people who control the smuggling route used to bring in the Nal-toon wouldn't cross the street for anything worth much less than a hundred thousand. Of course, the idol could have been hollowed out and stuffed with something—drugs, microfilm, gold, whatever. The problem is that nothing contraband that could have been stuffed in the idol *would* have been, not by these guys. The Nal-toon is just too ungainly and obvious, which is why Alan Berg was able to trace it in the first place. We're still left with the question

of why a gang of mafiosi are looking to pick up a three-foot-high piece of carved hardwood."

"Oh, Veil," Reyna whispered. There was a slight tremor in her voice.

Veil glanced up from his coffee. Reyna, sitting across from him in the booth at the rear of the diner on Seventy-second Street, had her head bowed and her hands clasped in front of her, as if in prayer. Although she was just a few years shy of thirty, Veil thought, her appearance was that of a troubled child. He reached out and stroked her hair. "Easy, Reyna," he said gently.

"You sound so cold when you talk about it."

"I don't mean to. I was just trying to figure out what the bad guys' interests are. I *do* care."

Reyna looked up, smiled wanly, and squeezed his hand. "I know you do," she said, wiping tears from her eyes. "You came to the park to look for Toby, didn't you?"

"Well, I had the notion. I remembered what you'd said about 'going to ground'—hiding. I've had some experience with tribal hunter-gatherers, and I've done some tracking."

"It was in the Army, wasn't it?"

Veil said nothing.

"How old are you, Veil?"

"Pushing forty."

"Vietnam?"

"Somewhere in the vicinity," Veil replied with a thin smile. "Anyway, the minute I walked into the park, I knew I'd been suffering from delusions of grandeur. If an army of police who knew the territory hadn't been able to find him, then I wasn't going to be able to. Then I saw you at work. You're good."

For the first time since Veil had met her, the woman's face broke into a warm smile that was free of anxiety. "Why do you say that? I didn't find him, either."

"But you obviously knew what you were doing—whatever it was you were doing. What could you hope to find after all that traffic had been through there last night?"

"Oh, what I was doing isn't really all that mysterious.

The first thing Toby would have done when he got into the park was kick off his shoes and socks. K'ung have big splayed toes, so they leave distinctive footprints."

Veil shrugged. "Then we'll go back together and look for K'ung footprints."

Reyna shook her head. "I don't think we'll find any. Even at night, and even on strange terrain, Toby would have instinctively looked for and found hard or grassy ground to run on. He has jungle lore; the tribe occasionally hunts in the jungle along the edge of the desert."

"You do know one hell of a lot about this tribe, don't you?"

"I grew up with them, Veil. As a matter of fact, Toby was my best friend as a child; I learned to hunt and track with all the K'ung boy-children. I was a 'missionary kid.' "

"You told me that. Your parents were the first to make contact with this particular tribe."

"Yes. Anyway, after my parents were killed by a Bantu raiding party—"

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you. I was twelve. I became a ward of the Missionary Society, and it assumed responsibility for my support and education. I was sent to school in France and the United States, did some of my own missionary work with the K'ung, and now I teach at Wesley while I work on my dissertation. End of story. My background may seem a bit exotic, but it's really quite simple. I'm betting that *your* background is exotic. I've never seen anyone fight like you do."

Her story had not included any mention of Carl Nagle, Veil thought, but he did not want to press her further. "You're sure your friend is still in the park?"

"Oh, yes. Toby's recuperating, resting and waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"To leave."

"Where would he go?"

Reyna studied Veil's face for a few moments, then abruptly dropped her gaze. "We'll just have to wait and see, I guess."

"Then the police may pick him up yet."

"No," Reyna said, her voice and limpid, black eyes once again filled with sadness. "He'll never allow himself to be captured alive, Veil. Never."

"Everything in Berg's articles indicated that the tribe was on its last legs—defeated, without hope, totally lethargic. I don't believe those are words I'd use to describe this Toby."

Reyna smiled grimly, shook her head. "Indeed not. Toby was always different—the toughest and meanest member of the tribe. He and I became friends, but he always resented my parents because they were Christian missionaries; in Toby's eyes they were enemies of the Nal-toon. No member of that tribe has ever been converted to Christianity, of course, but the attitude of the others was always rather mellow, if a bit condescending; after all, they could make good use of the knives, medicine, and other things we brought them. Toby, on the other hand, was always belligerent. Everyone always felt that he had a special relationship, if you will, with the Nal-toon. If there had been an official keeper of that idol, Toby would have been it."

"He's a zealot."

"Mmm. A zealot and a half. I strongly suspect that he doesn't view the loss of the Nal-toon in the way the others do. He may not see it as abandonment by their god but as a test of the tribe's worthiness. The use of shilluk has some religious overtones for the K'ung, which could mean that Toby perceives this journey as a kind of mystical rite to regain the Nal-toon's favor. If that's the case, Toby will also perceive virtually everything that happens to him as a test of his courage and faith; he will absolutely abandon himself to the belief that the Nal-toon will protect him from harm as long as he acts like a warrior."

"That would explain his dash across Fifth Avenue. It wasn't just panic."

"No. He believed he was protected."

"Hey, he may be on to something," Veil said, smiling. "After all, he did make it across the street—and they haven't found him yet. I may get myself a Nal-toon."

"Toby coming to New York City could be very bad news, Veil," Reyna said seriously. "You've seen what's happened already. He's dangerous."

"I know."

"All the time I was searching, I kept calling out to him. I wanted him to know he was in danger and that he could come to me. If he heard, he didn't respond." Reyna paused and sighed. "He probably doesn't trust me. He may not even think I'm real."

"Not real?"

"Veil, in New York, Toby might as well be a visitor from another galaxy; everything here is totally alien to him. Also, depending upon how much shilluk he brought with him, he'll view everything as part of some netherworld constructed by the Nal-toon to challenge him. He'll perceive the people here as a tribe of ghost-demons whom he can't trust but who can hurt him if he's not brave and true to his faith."

"Then we'd better find him before the police or Mafia do. I want to help, Reyna."

"I know. Thank you."

"If you can get me to him, I may be able to stop Toby from hurting himself or others."

"Yes."

"What do you suggest we do?"

"For now, wait."

Again, Reyna had averted her gaze, and Veil had the definite impression that she was hiding something—holding something back. "Would you like more coffee? Something to eat?"

Reyna shook her head, then looked at him and offered what seemed to Veil a slightly forced smile. "No, thank you. I guess what I'd really like is a little more information about you. You already know everything important there is to know about me."

"I strongly doubt that."

"It's true. But I know next to nothing about you—except that you're an artist, fight like nobody I've ever seen, and seem to be my guardian angel. Even your name is mysterious. Is Veil a family name?"

"More like a family prayer."

Reyna smiled warmly and cocked her head. "Please tell me about it."

"I was born with a very high fever, and a caul, and the doctors gave me about two hours to live. My parents had a metaphysical streak in them, so they immediately named me Veil. Who knows? Maybe my name saved my life."

Reyna laughed softly. "Then you do have your Nal-toon: your name."

"Why not?"

"You said you weren't religious."

"I'm not. I believe in gravity and mathematics. But I also, most definitely, believe in mystery. To me there's more mystery in one ordinary day in the life of any ordinary human being than there is in all of the religious fables ever told or written."

"Well, obviously I think differently. To me Our Lord Jesus is mankind's Savior and the Son of God." Suddenly Reyna put her hand over her mouth in a strikingly child-like gesture and giggled. "But I won't try to convert you."

"I'm relieved."

"I like you, Veil."

"Thank you. And I like you."

"Wow," Reyna said with a grin as she studied the solidly built man with the broad shoulders and thickly muscled arms sitting across from her. As solid as he was, she had never seen anyone as quick and lithe. "You certainly survived, all right."

Veil considered his reply carefully. Secretive by nature, the bizarre residue of his fever was something he almost never discussed, an affliction that was known only to a very few friends, like Victor Raskolnikov and a certain dwarf. And Sharon. Now, however, he decided that he would share this part of himself with Reyna Alexander, in the hope that she might come to appreciate the gift and share her own secrets—secrets he was certain she held and which he suspected could involve the Nal-toon, Toby, and his own new and powerful enemy, Carl Nagle.

"The fever left me with some permanent brain damage," Veil said at last.

Reyna's smile faltered, as if she were uncertain as to whether or not he might be joking. "Well, you certainly could have fooled me."

"If there's such a thing as a kind of psychic membrane separating the conscious from the unconscious, then the fever I was born with burned it away. It left me vulnerable, you might say, to my dreams. I'm what's known in the literature as a vivid dreamer; my dreams are every bit as real to me as what's happening at this moment."

"You mean, you can't tell when you're dreaming?"

"Now I can. For most of my life I couldn't, though."

Reyna thought about it, then suddenly frowned. "Nightmares . . . ?"

"Oh, as a kid, I not only was chased by the usual ogres and dragons, I was usually caught and eaten."

"Lord, Veil, I know you're minimizing it. The *terror* you must have felt!"

Veil shrugged, smiled easily. "It caused me some problems. For one thing, it made me into a very cranky kid, adolescent, and—for a good many years—adult. But that's another story or two."

"I'd like to hear all your stories."

"We'll see. Anyway, painting proved to be a kind of therapy. By more or less painting my dreams, I got to the point where I could recognize dreams and even control them. Now, when I start to have a nightmare, I just go away—unless I feel it could have some value."

"What possible value could a nightmare have?"

"Oh, you never know. We resolve a lot of things in dreams. In any case, that approach to painting lent my work a certain style, and it's been my good fortune to have people pay for it occasionally."

"I'm sorry to say that I've never seen any of your work, but you must be very good if you're shown in the Raskolnikov Galleries."

"Victor's kind. He thinks I'm *going* to be good."

"Nonsense. I know you're good now."

"Reyna, I'd like to know more about you."

This time Reyna did not look away, but her eyes

clouded, and she quickly shook her head as she plucked nervously at the sleeve of her blouse. "You know all there is to know."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, thanks to you."

"Those two are gone from the park by now, and I strongly doubt that they'll be back. Are you sure you wouldn't like to go back and look for Toby's footprints together?"

The dark-haired woman with the troubled, dark eyes thought about it as she slowly folded her napkin, then set it down beside her empty cup. "No," she said at last. "He'll never show himself if you're with me. I think it's best just to let things sit for a while."

"Reyna, I keep getting the feeling that you're keeping something from me—something important. What is it?"

"Please don't, Veil," Reyna whispered.

"You can trust me."

"I think so."

"Know so."

"Veil, everything's happened so quickly. I . . . have a lot of thinking to do. By myself."

"All right," Veil said, reaching across the table and pressing her hand. "Then I'll take you home."

"It's not necessary, unless you're going that way."

"To tell the truth, I wasn't planning on it. There's somebody I'd like to talk to."

Reyna patted Veil's arm as she rose. "Then you go ahead and take care of your business. I really am all right. I'll take a cab home."

Veil paid the bill, then walked Reyna out to the curb and hailed a cab. When the taxi pulled away, he crossed the street and headed for the subway.

Chapter Six

Veil searched the streets around Columbia University, then headed into Morningside Park. Fifteen minutes later he found Picker Crabbe. The tall, gaunt man was seated on a park bench near West 120th Street, casually leafing through the latest issue of *Hustler* while he waited for customers. The man glanced up and saw Veil approaching. He flung the magazine to one side, jumped up, and started running down the sidewalk in the opposite direction. Veil easily caught up with him, grabbed him by the arm, and spun him around.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Picker? This is the second time you've run away when you saw me."

"You're a crazy man," Crabbe said, wincing and raising his arms in front of his face as if to ward off a blow. It was just past ten in the morning, but the man's pupils were already dilated from the effects of cocaine.

Veil laughed as he released Picker Crabbe's thin arm. "If you ran every time you saw a crazy man in New York, you'd die of exhaustion before noon."

Crabbe sniffed, then pushed a strand of greasy gray-

brown hair away from his eyes. He looked as if he wanted to run, but he stayed where he was. "You beat up on me pretty good."

"That was a year and a half ago."

"It was the kind of beating a man don't forget. You *thought* about what you were doing to me. Man, I ain't never been beat on like that."

"I don't see any lasting damage."

"Damage ain't the point, man. It hurt."

"It was supposed to hurt, and you were supposed to remember it the next time you were tempted to get into the child pornography and prostitution game. One of the kids you were pimping for had been kidnapped three months before, beat on, and drugged."

"I didn't do no kidnapping, and I didn't do none of that other stuff. I was just working for a piece of the action."

"I know. The man who did do the kidnapping is dead. You are out of that business now, aren't you?"

"Yes!"

"Good. Maybe you deserved to die, Picker. At the time I did give some thought to killing you. I didn't, so I figure you owe me something."

"What do you want?"

"Information. What were you doing parked on Sixty-ninth last night? I know you were supposed to be watching the art gallery, so give me the condensed version of the story."

Crabbe blinked slowly. "What art gallery?"

Veil sighed. "Picker, I just had a talk with those two jerks you got to tail the woman. Incidentally, they asked me to tell you that they resign."

"Oh, Jesus."

"So let's cut through the bullshit, okay? What were you doing there?"

"You're right. I was supposed to keep an eye on the place. There were other guys too. It was my bad luck to have you come along on my shift."

"Why were you supposed to watch the place?"

"To make sure that idol wasn't stolen. If it was, to try to

stop the guy; if I couldn't, to get a good look at who it was doing the stealing."

"Somehow I find that funny, Picker. You're telling me a thief was sent out to make certain the statue wasn't stolen by another thief?"

"It's the truth."

"Who hired you?"

"I can't tell you that, man."

"Now, Picker . . ."

To Veil's astonishment, tears welled in Crabbe's eyes, then picked up grime like mascara as they rolled down his cheeks. "I'm being straight with you, man," Crabbe said in a near whimper. "I don't mind telling you most of what I know, because I don't know that much. But I can't give you that name. I know you can bust me up, and God knows I don't want you to, but I can't give you the name. He's as crazy as you are, man; you're two sides of the same coin—except that you'll hurt me for this but you won't kill me. This guy'll hurt me worse than you did, and *then* he'll kill me. For sure. He likes it."

"How would he know you told me?"

"I ain't takin' no chances, man. I don't want to be tortured, and I don't want to die."

Veil looked at the trembling man before him, saw the tears in his eyes and the defeated sag of his shoulders. Suddenly he was disgusted with the terror in the world and ashamed of that part of it he had, with whatever justification, helped nurture. Picker Crabbe made him feel profoundly sad. There were too many Picker Crabbes in the world, he thought; victims who victimized, producing victims who victimized.

"Forget it, Picker," Veil said quietly. "I don't want the name of the man who put you on the job. But tell me this: If your man is so interested in the statue, why didn't he just have you steal it?"

"I'm not sure. He may have been afraid there was a police stakeout."

"So you and the others were put in place just to make certain that the police did their job?"

"I'm just guessing. He moved so fast, nobody could have stopped him."

"Why do these people want the statue?"

"I don't know."

"The two men you sent out told me you were going to give them a grand each if they brought you back the idol. Is that true?"

"Yeah."

"Do you have the money?"

"I could've got it."

"From the man whose name you won't give me?"

"Him or others. It was a street contract. The word was out that the statue was worth five grand to certain people." Crabbe paused, put a dirty index finger beside his nose. "I'd heard about the contract, but I knew those other two hadn't. I figured I had nothing to lose by promising those two guys a thousand each to follow the girl, then grab the idol from that guy if she found him. I'd still clear three grand."

"All right, then there's a general street contract out on the statue; anyone who brings it in and hands it over to certain people can collect the reward. Was it your idea to follow the woman?"

"Nah. The same guy who put me on the street to watch the gallery gave me the woman's address and suggested that I keep an eye on her."

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Veil sat in the cool shadows at the rear of the church sanctuary throughout the afternoon. At four-thirty, a door to the left of the altar opened and a priest stepped through. The man was around six feet, Veil's height, and in his mid- to late fifties. His hair was thick and black, with a few pronounced streaks of gray. A solid man with broad shoulders, he walked with a severe limp that caused his body to roll from side to side as he moved to the center of the altar rail, kissed his purple vestment, then knelt and prayed for a few minutes. Finally he rose and entered the confessional to the far left. Veil looked around, determined

that he was alone, then walked quickly to the confessional, went in, and sat down on the narrow wooden bench inside.

"I've come to talk about sin, Father," Veil said softly as a small door opened in the partition separating the two men.

There was a long pause, then, "Veil?" The priest's voice was hoarse and gravelly, as if something had been broken in his throat.

"Yes."

There was another equally long pause. When the priest finally spoke, there was a note of dry humor in his voice. "Am I to assume that you've found your way to God?"

"No, Father. I'm afraid I'll have to seek salvation in other ways."

"There are no other ways."

"For now I'll settle for having found my way to you."

"What do you want with me, Veil?"

"I need information that you may have, Father."

"Veil, this is a confessional."

"I'm aware of that, Father, and I don't mean to be disrespectful—but this is Little Italy, and I don't want to risk having anyone see you talking to me. I've attracted quite a following since yesterday, and I haven't quite figured out who's watching whom."

"God protects me, Veil."

"I need to get plugged in on some family business, Father."

"It isn't proper for you to come to me with such a request, Veil. I can't help you."

"I think you can. This isn't a matter anyone would have spoken to you about in the confessional. No disrespect meant here, either, Father—you happen to be one of the most truly religious and good men I know, but you also happen to be the closest thing to a 'house priest' the mob has."

There was a sudden, palpable increase in tension inside the confessional. "It is because I am not judgmental."

"It's because three generations of your family have been

Cosa Nostra; you're the only male who didn't go into the business—everyone around you did. As far as being judgmental is concerned, I don't recall that I was too judgmental when you came to me for help in finding out where your mistress had taken your illegitimate son; you couldn't go to anyone else. I was the one who negotiated what you might call a reconciliation agreement. Now I'm asking for your help."

The priest heaved a deep sigh. "What are you looking for, Veil?"

"Somebody else's god. You've heard about the idol they call the Nal-toon?"

"Yes."

"What have you heard?"

"I read the newspapers, listen to the news reports."

"What else do you hear?"

"Notwithstanding the great favor you did for me, Veil, I don't think it's right for you to come to me on a fishing expedition."

"This is a bit more than a fishing expedition, Father. The Mafia wants the idol, don't they?"

"Yes."

"Do you know why?"

"No."

"'Father . . . ?"

"It's the truth, Veil. The fact that it's wanted by the capos is common knowledge on the street; indeed, there's a bounty for anyone who brings the idol in and hands it over to any of the top people in the five families. However, the reason for their wanting it is a carefully guarded secret."

"They could be worried about the possibility that it wouldn't be turned in if people knew why they wanted it."

"Perhaps. I don't care to speculate."

"You mentioned five families. What happened to the sixth?"

There was a prolonged silence, and Veil could sense the conflict and indecision in the other man on the opposite side of the partition. "Vito Ricci is dead," the priest said at

last. "His operations are being absorbed by the other families, along with those people who are deemed worthy. The Ricci family no longer exists."

Veil suppressed a whistle. "That's some bit of news."

"It's no news at all yet. The police and the FBI know that Vito is missing, of course, but that is all they know. It hasn't made the papers. Nobody will ever find his body, and the authorities will eventually just naturally assume he is dead."

"Execution?"

"Yes. It was Vito who was responsible for trying to squeeze the idol through that smuggling pipeline. Apparently he wanted it for personal reasons. It was an insane act, Veil, and it was not even properly executed at this end. If things had been properly planned, the idol never would have ended up on an auction block, and it certainly wouldn't have surfaced in some art gallery on the East Side in the same week that the first article appeared in *The Times*. The whole thing was an unmitigated disaster, and Vito paid for his mistake with his life." The priest paused, added dryly, "He must have been getting senile."

"Maybe. Is there a contract out on the K'ung?"

"The what?"

"The black who stole back the idol. Are there specific orders to kill him?"

"No, but I don't suppose that will prevent his death. The easiest way to obtain the idol, of course, is to kill the man carrying it."

"If they find him."

From the darkness on the other side of the filigreed partition came a hoarse chuckle laced with sadness. "Find him? How long can a bushman who's lived all his life in the desert hide in New York City?"

"He's doing pretty well so far, isn't he?"

"I believe he's dead, Veil. I am sorry if this is so, but I believe it's just a matter of finding his corpse and taking the idol from beside it."

"Could be."

"What was done against him and his tribe is very sad."

"Yeah. What do you think will happen to the idol if the police find him first?"

"Oh, I think it's safe to assume that the idol will eventually find its way into the hands of the capos."

"Why, Father? Is it because Carl Nagle is in charge of the police investigation?"

The question brought a sharp intake of breath; the partition vibrated, as if the priest had moved suddenly and inadvertently brushed against it. "What do you know about Carl Nagle?"

"Virtually nothing, except that he comes on pretty cranky. Within hours after the black ran off with the idol, someone gave a two-bit hood by the name of Picker Crabbe the name and address of the woman who'd brought the black to the gallery. The short time span makes me think that it was either Nagle or his partner—or both—who supplied the information. I'm thinking that detectives Nagle and Vahanian may be on the mob payroll. What do you think, Father?"

Veil waited almost a full minute, but the only sound from the other side of the partition was hoarse breathing. Finally it was Veil who spoke. "Thank you, Father," he said evenly. "I hadn't come to you before this, and I won't come again. I consider any debt there might have been between us paid."

Veil stepped out of the confessional booth, ducked through the heavy curtain, and walked in the cool, oddly comforting gloom of the sanctuary toward a side exit.

"Veil, please wait."

Veil turned and was alarmed to see the priest out of the booth and rolling toward him. Veil quickly glanced around but was engulfed in the priest's arms before he had a chance to see whether or not they were being observed. The priest kissed Veil on both cheeks, then hobbled back a step. His gray eyes gleamed in the semidarkness.

"I have not asked you why you want this information because I know it is for a good cause," the priest said in his broken voice. "You may not believe in God, Veil Kendry, but you are nonetheless a man of God. God's existence

does not depend upon your belief in Him, nor does He exact faith in return for His mercy, benevolence, and protection. You are a strange man, and there are strange—often conflicting—stories told about you. But there is no doubt in my mind that you walk with God, and God watches over and works through you. No doubt at all.

"My debt is not paid. As far as you are concerned, my debt will never be paid. You may come to me anytime someone is in need of help and you feel that information I can supply may be useful."

"Thank you, Father."

"I can never repay you for what you did with my . . . woman and my son. God forgive me for saying so, but not even He could fill the hole left in my life when they were gone. For many years I have prayed to resolve this conflict. Sometimes I have—literally—prayed until my knees bled. But it seems I am all too human, too much of the flesh. The conflict cannot be resolved, and so I am reduced to prayers for the salvation of my soul despite the continual breaking of my solemn vows."

"You don't have to tell me these things, Father."

"Those were things I wanted to tell you. But there is also something I *must* tell you. It is Carl Nagle whom you must watch out for; I cannot stress this point strongly enough. Vahanian knows nothing, and he would be in great danger if Nagle even suspected that he did. Nagle is more than just one more crooked cop on the take, Veil. He's an enforcer. And he is quite mad. I've heard it said—often—that he enjoys inflicting physical pain. I don't know. Certainly he has no feelings that you and I would be familiar with. I have never known, or heard of, anyone so able to instill pure terror into anyone he chooses to intimidate. The measure of this is the fact that he is an Honors cop, one of the most decorated in the department. He is so successful in solving cases precisely because he can terrorize information out of anyone. He could have been promoted many times, but, of course, he cannot leave the streets because that is where he earns by far the

greatest part of his income, for the Mafia. And, of course, he is at home there."

"Nobody's ever blown the whistle on this guy?"

"Three times his victims have tried. You must remember that the families have strong connections in the police department."

"Nobody, and no organization, has that much control over the police in this city; I know too many decent, honest cops at all levels of command."

"Nevertheless, Carl Nagle has always been exonerated. His three accusers ended up . . . broken. Word gets around. He is an unbelievably dangerous man, Veil, totally ruthless, without scruples or mercy. He is probably the man who was sent to kill Vito Ricci. He is truly a monster, and it is said that only those who have seen his true face can know just how terrible he is."

"To tell you the truth, Father, I didn't much care for his everyday face. I'll keep an eye out for him."

"There's more. I hear that the responsibility for finding the idol has been given to Nagle personally by the family heads. In fact, influence was brought to bear inside the police department to have Nagle transferred from his own precinct to the East Side after the idol turned up in the gallery; the families hoped that merely being in his jurisdiction would deter petty thieves. The fact is that Nagle has been skating on thin ice for some time, and so he's under particular pressure to see that the capos get the idol."

"Why has he been skating on thin ice?"

"Detective Nagle has always had a difficult time keeping his pecker in his pants. It seems he has a penchant for raping and sodomizing young women unfortunate enough to fall into his orbit—hookers, junkies, sometimes teenage runaways."

"Oh, Jesus."

"Yes—oh, Jesus. Anyway, even his outside employers have been finding Nagle a bit difficult to stomach lately. As you know, it's not easy to survive the disapproval of these people. Nagle knows that. He won't be raping any

kids for a while, but he knows that he needs to get the idol for the capos in order to get back into their good graces. He's under pressure, which means that his low flash point is going to be even lower while he hunts for the bushman and the idol. Since you appear to be involving yourself in this matter, I wanted you to know the nature of one of your enemies. Carl Nagle is perhaps the cruelest and most dangerous man you've ever met."

"Well, those are two titles he'll have to earn," Veil said as he embraced the priest. "Thank you again, Father. You've been a great help."

"Go with God, Veil."

• • •

Twenty years before, in jungle ooze and rot, Veil had learned from the Viet Cong and Pathet Lao how to wait. And so he waited; for almost two weeks he waited, but there was no word of the missing K'ung warrior-prince or of the idol he carried. It was, Veil thought, as if Toby's god had somehow moved them both through time and space and returned them to the Kalahari. Which, of course, Veil knew had not happened.

He began to have the odd but persistent feeling that he knew something important, but he could not determine what it was.

In his quest to do what he could to save the K'ung's life and see the idol returned to its rightful owners, Veil viewed himself as a kind of lone guerrilla, without any natural constituency. To Toby, should Veil find him, he would be nothing but a hostile ghost, something to run a spear through. Also, he was certain that Reyna Alexander did not trust him completely. He did not return to Central Park, reasoning that if Reyna could not find Toby, he could not, either—and would not know what to do with the K'ung if he did.

The feeling that he knew something important persisted.

During the first week he'd called Reyna frequently but had found her gone at odd hours; when finally he had

reached her, she had sounded sleepy—as though she were catching up on sleep whenever she could. Twice he had waited outside the missionary college, then tried to follow her when she had come out. Each time he had lost her; as good as he was at trailing and tracking, Reyna was better. Obviously wary, she started off each time in a different direction; then, in what had seemed a wink of an eye, she had vanished—into a crowd or store or around a corner. It had occurred to Veil that Reyna had found Toby and was hiding and ministering to him—but he had rejected the idea. If she had found the K'ung, Veil reasoned, she eventually would have convinced him to allow her to take him to a hospital, a police station, or perhaps even a foreign consulate to ask for asylum.

Veil concluded that Reyna was still searching for Toby—in Central Park, perhaps, but also beyond. She knew something.

They both knew the same thing, Veil thought. The crucial difference was that Reyna realized exactly what it was she knew.

The attention of the media had begun to flag in the second week, and there was only an occasional news update—using file footage—on the tribe itself, which was being kept informed of events by the two Wesley missionaries and had paused in its self-inflicted moral and physical genocide to await the outcome of Toby's strange odyssey.

In Southern California, a Church of the Black Messiah had been formed; emissaries from the mother church were en route to New York in order to consecrate Victor's gallery as holy ground.

Toby emerged from his cover on a Friday night, close to midnight. Veil had been painting at his easel since dawn, working on a new series of canvases, monitoring—as always—the news on both radio and cable television. When the bulletin was announced, Veil turned off the radio and concentrated on the CNN coverage. He tried to call Reyna, but she was not home.

After an hour of watching live coverage, interspersed

with reporters' speculations on where Toby had been hiding and where he was heading, Veil cleaned his brushes, washed up, and prepared to go out. Then he thought better of it. First, he knew he was exhausted; second, he saw no point in going to Central Park to join the crowd that was already there—police, reporters, and, undoubtedly, Carl Nagle. There was simply nothing he could do. Also, he strongly suspected that wherever Reyna Alexander was, she was not in Central Park.

Veil downed a stiff drink, then went to bed in order to rest his body and search his mind for the important thing that he knew.

Chapter Seven

Veil dreams.

He sees Toby running up the street toward Central Park and imagines himself entering the bushman's body, mind, and soul. In the process he wills himself to lose his language, to remember only those few English words Toby would have learned from Reyna and the missionaries. He will see through Toby's eyes, feel with Toby's body, think with Toby's mind, filter sensations through Toby's consciousness.

Veil will be Toby.

He has never seen such a weapon before, one that attacks hearing at the same time as it hurls an invisible spear to pierce the flesh and cause terrible pain. However, at the moment he'd heard the crash of the bang-stick and felt the hot pain in his left shoulder, he'd made a number of split-second decisions. Even as he'd hurled the spear at the man wielding the magic weapon, he'd been planning ahead, aware that he would have to run and seek sanctuary.

Now, as he runs on the *street* toward the jungle Reyna

has called *Centralpark,* Veil feels weighed down by the *clothes* the missionaries have forced him to wear. However, there is no time now to remove the *clothes*; his acute hearing and warrior instincts combine to warn him that a *Newyorkcity* warrior is close behind him and gaining. His shoulder burns with pain; he cannot stop and fight, so he must reach the safe, green darkness of *Centralpark*.

The muscles in his back reflexively tense in anticipation of the agonizing sting of a bang-stick spear, but he does not slow his pace as he approaches the *street* with its speeding *cars*. Buoyed by the feel of the Nal-toon under his arm, knowing that to stop or slow down will mean certain death or capture, Veil leaps out onto the *street* and races for the other side, rhythmically driving the shaft of the second spear he has taken to the smooth stone at his feet in an effort to maintain his momentum.

He is immediately assailed by blinding lights and sharp, blasting cries of hurting sounds that swirl around him like a great desert wind. Then he is across the *street*. He leaps over a low stone wall, trips, gets up, and stumbles into the protective, dark shroud of *Centralpark*. He trips again as he goes down a stone embankment and twists onto his wounded shoulder in order to protect the Nal-toon and his spear.

Ignoring the fresh stabs of pain in his shoulder, Veil removes his *shoes* and *socks*, then struggles to his feet. Without the *shoes* he feels lighter—just as the Nal-toon somehow feels lighter than it did in memory. He races through a stand of trees and around the perimeter of a huge clearing; bushes and tree limbs tear at his *clothes,* slowing him down, but he remains inside the line of trees in order to avoid the white glow of moonlight on the meadow to his right.

He stops on the side of a rocky hillside, starts to remove his *clothes,* then hesitates. The night is growing cold, he thinks, and he doubts that he will be able to build a fire. The *clothes* will afford him some protection from the night-cold, and he decides to keep them on.

Veil searches until he finds a large outcropping of rock at the northwest end of a large body of water that is sur-

rounded by a number of the curious, winding paths of smooth stone which the *Newyorkcities* seem to build everywhere. He sets down his spear and the Nal-toon, then takes a piece of *clothes* from his body and uses it to soak up the blood running down his left arm. When he is satisfied that he will leave no blood-spoor to follow, he picks up the spear and Nal-toon and clambers up the long, sloping rock face before him.

After a time he finds a cleft in the rock just wide enough to allow his body to pass through. He eases himself down and finds himself on a narrow, sandy patch of ground that spreads out beneath the cleft—which he can now see is the lip of an overhanging ledge. He pulls the Nal-toon and spear after him, then lies down in the darkness and listens carefully, trying to distinguish those night sounds that could signal danger from the overall din that *Newyorkcity* emits like the never-ending howl of some great wounded beast.

The relative quiet of *Centralpark* is suddenly broken by distant, wailing sounds that seem to come from the direction of the place where he found the Nal-toon. Without knowing why, Veil is convinced that the shrieking, ululating sounds have something to do with him; he fears they are the sounds of magic machines the *Newyorkcities* can use to track him. Clenching his teeth against the pain in his shoulder, Veil stretches up on his toes in order to see over the lip of the ledge.

What Veil sees startles him, and truly frightens him for the first time. A flying machine that is not an *airplane,* one which he has seen before only in the desert, suddenly comes scudding low, like a giant insect, across the trees at the southern end of the meadow before him. He has seen how these flying machines can soar and sweep and even hover in the air for a long period of time. He had always assumed that these magic machines were used by the white tribes only to drop bundles of food to the K'ung in times of need, but now one of them is searching for him, lighting the ground with its fire-eyes.

The *Newyorkcity* hunters have very powerful magic, Veil thinks, and it occurs to him that they may be able to find

him, no matter where, or how well, he hides. If that is the case, he wants to die fighting as a warrior, not like some wounded animal cowering at the back of a cave.

He starts to pull himself up through the cleft, then remembers with a sharp jolt that he is under the Nal-toon's protection. He has been a fool, Veil thinks, for the Nal-toon has given these things to the *Newyorkcities*, just as He gave the desert, and everything in it, to the K'ung. The Nal-toon sees and controls everything, and there would be no point to this trial if the *Newyorkcities'* magic machines and weapons were all-powerful. No. He will be safe for as long as he displays courage and keeps faith in the Nal-toon.

Veil eases himself down into the darkness beneath the overhang. He touches the face of the Nal-toon and immediately feels better.

When he again peers over the lip of the ledge, Veil can see that the first flying machine has been joined by a second. Both are hovering, lighting the meadow around the water. *Newyorkcity* warriors, all wearing identical blue *clothes*, swarm over the meadow and through the trees where he had been only a short time before. All of the warriors carry what appear to be bang-sticks of different sizes.

He has killed one of their tribesmen, Veil thinks, and the *Newyorkcity* warriors will surely kill him if he is caught. He will have failed the trial set by the Nal-toon, and the Nal-toon will never be returned to his people.

However, Veil thinks, the fact that the warriors are so earnestly searching for him seems to mean, as he'd suspected, that their magic is not all-powerful. He decides it is a very good sign.

He quickly ducks when he hears footsteps clatter on the rocks near him. Gathering the Nal-toon and spear against his chest, Veil presses back beneath the overhang as a cone of light flashes down through the narrow opening and sweeps the sandy area where he had been a moment before. Then the light goes out and the sound of *shoes* on stone moves away.

Veil sighs with relief, then rolls over on his right side in an effort to ease the pain in his left shoulder. He knows

that the bang-stick has left its small, hurting spear deep in the muscle; he can feel it there, grinding against the bone every time he moves. He knows he must take it out, for the slightest movement of his arm sends jagged flashes of pain down through the muscles to his fingertips. He can only hope that the bang-stick spear is not poisoned. However, poisoned or not, he cannot attempt to remove the spear before morning; he needs a fire, and a night-fire would be certain to attract the *Newyorkcity* warriors.

He wishes he had more shilluk to ease his pain, but he does not; he consumed all of it during his terrifying journey on the *airplane*.

But the Nal-toon is with him, Veil thinks as he gently strokes God's wooden surface, and that is enough for any K'ung warrior. The Nal-toon's face conjures up images of the desert. Home. He will survive this great trial with the Nal-toon's help—and, indeed, that help is already apparent, for God has made Himself noticeably easier to carry. When he returns with the Nal-toon to his people, things will be as they were before; there will be joy, laughter, and dancing in the camp, and for the rest of his life the Nal-toon will look upon him with special favor.

Veil's pain begins to ease as he continues to stroke the Nal-toon's rough surface. Finally he rests his head on God, closes his eyes, and drifts off to sleep within sleep.

• • •

Still imagining himself as Toby, Veil dreams he awakens to find himself sick to his stomach and feverish. The pain in his left shoulder has become a constant, searing ball of agony that sends flickering tongues of flame out into his neck, down through his arm, and into his fingers.

He is being poisoned by the bang-stick spear. The spear must be cut out.

The thought of cutting into his own flesh without the numbing embrace of shilluk fills him with a cold fear, but he knows that he must begin immediately; if he waits any longer, he will soon be too weak to make the effort.

He picks up a dry stick and clenches it between his teeth to keep from crying out as he drags himself from beneath

the ledge and struggles to his feet; thunderbolts of pain crash through his arm.

"Nal-toon, help me," Veil whispers around the stick in his teeth. "Make me strong; make this warrior worthy of you."

Using his right arm, Veil pulls himself up to the lip of the overhang. He peers out over the rock formation—and freezes. His sanctuary is surrounded by *Newyorkcities*. There are runners dressed in strange, brightly colored *clothes* loping along the stone paths; other *Newyorkcities* throw discs that float in arcs through the air; women push babies in machines that roll along the ground like *Land-Rovers* but are silent.

Newyorkcity warriors in blue *clothes* walk in pairs. Their eyes are searching, and they occasionally touch the bang-sticks they carry in hiding pouches at their sides.

Struggling against the draining effects of his fever, Veil lets himself back down, then lies under the ledge and waits until nightfall, when he can no longer hear the *Newyorkcities* in *Centralpark* laughing and shouting as they carry on their frenzied, apparently meaningless, activities. As the moon rises, Veil once again drags himself out from beneath the ledge onto the narrow strip of sand. He drags the Nal-toon after him.

Despite the great risk of attracting enemy warriors, Veil knows that he must build a fire. He uses a piece of flint from the small medicine pouch he wears around his neck to fire sparks into a pile of dry leaves and twigs he has swept up from the sand and placed against a vertical face of the rock. The leaves catch first, and Veil carefully feeds the delicate wisps of flame with increasingly larger sticks and clumps of dried brush, which he pulls from cracks in the rock.

When he is satisfied with the fire's heat, he grasps the shaft of his spear and places the long, iron head into the heart of the flames. Then he strips the *clothes* from the upper part of his body.

He is ready.

Gripping the spear's shaft just behind the head, Veil fixes his gaze on the face of the Nal-toon. In the flickering

firelight, magnified by the fever-heat in Veil's brain, the gnarled face of God seems very much alive to him; God is breathing, gazing back kindly at His worshiper. Veil opens his eyes wide and continues to gaze into the carved eyeholes of the Nal-toon. Then he begins to take a series of deep, measured breaths until he feels a kind of misty, numbing warmth seeping into his mind and muscles. When he looks back into the fire, he imagines that he can see the desert in all its countless, shifting guises; when he glances back at God, the images of home continue to dance on the Nal-toon's face.

He slowly withdraws the iron spearhead from the fire, then holds it aloft for a few moments to allow it to cool. Then, still breathing deeply and clinging to the desert-images in his mind, Veil begins to probe the wound in his shoulder with the needle-sharp point of the spear.

Huge drops of sweat pop from his skin, glisten in the firelight, then roll off his flesh, to be sucked up by the sand. Sweat forms a stinging film over his eyes as Veil struggles to maintain the desert-images, his only shilluk, before him.

Then the small metal bang-stick spear is out. Veil reels from pain, but he knows that there is still one thing left he must do. He shoves the spearhead back into the flames and slowly counts to ten. Then, in one swift motion, he withdraws the iron and slaps its face against the torn, bleeding flesh of his left shoulder. There is a sharp hiss, accompanied by the sweetish smell of burning flesh.

The desert-images explode in a kaleidoscope of color and distant, wailing sound as Veil faints.

• • •

Veil's dream-body, his Toby, awakens to the feel of a cold rain falling on his face and an animal sniffing at his left ear. His instincts, born of survival in a narrow twilight zone separating life from death in the desert, tell him to remain still.

He parts his lips slightly to let raindrops fall on his parched and swollen tongue, but even this small movement brings a menacing growl from whatever animal

crouches to his left, just beyond his field of vision. It does not sound like a leopard, Veil thinks, and a lone baboon or jackal would not come this close to a breathing man. It could be a *Newyorkcity* camp dog, but it sounds larger.

Still sniffing and growling, the animal moves forward until Veil can see it; it is a dog, but unlike any he had ever seen before. This animal is all black. Muscles ripple beneath its sleek, glistening hide, and its bare fangs are white and unchipped. The dog's tail appears to have been torn off in a fight, for it is no more than a lump on the animal's hindquarters.

Breathing evenly and staring directly into the dog's eyes, Veil gropes with his right hand for his spear. Suddenly the black dog snaps at his face, and Veil moves his head aside just in time to avoid the animal's sharp fangs. At the same moment his fingers touch the shaft of his spear. He grips the shaft and rolls hard to his left, lunging directly at the startled animal and driving the spearhead deep into its throat.

The dog coughs a thick spray of blood and saliva, then shudders and collapses without a sound across Veil's chest. Veil immediately presses his mouth to the animal's throat and drinks the nourishing blood that pulses from the severed jugular. The blood hits Veil's stomach with the force of a physical blow; its effects spread quickly throughout his body, warming him and lending him strength. He is still drinking in great, deep gulps when the animal's heart finally stops beating.

The Nal-toon is merciful, Veil thinks; evidently satisfied with the courage he has displayed up to this point, God has provided him with the food he needs to go on.

His strength replenished, Veil carefully wraps the Nal-toon in a piece of *clothes*, then places God under the overhang, out of the rain. He drags the dog's carcass under the ledge, then meticulously smooths out all signs of struggle and death from the sand. He builds a small fire, then dresses the cauterized wound in his left shoulder with herbs from his medicine pouch and strips of *clothes*.

Reasonably free of pain, with his belly full and his mind in peaceful communion with God, Veil once again lies down and drifts off to sleep within sleep.

• • •

In Veil's dream, his Toby has lost track of the time that has passed since he found sanctuary in *Centralpark,* but the wound in his shoulder is now almost completely healed. Also, there has been such an abundance of food in this jungle that his normally lean body has begun to show traces of fat.

While the first dog had been delivered to him by the Nal-toon, he has had to stalk the others he has eaten. The water in the large pool nearby is not as sweet as that in the desert, but Veil has never seen water in such quantity; here it is not necessary to quickly scoop it up and store it in eggs before it seeps into the ground. He has been free to drink his fill each night, and this has made the long, hot, and waterless days spent hiding under the ledge easily bearable.

Now he feels strong and rested, and he knows that it is time to begin his journey to the vast, smooth, stone fields where the *airplanes* stay. There, he thinks, the *airplane* that brought him to *Newyorkcity* will be waiting to take him home. The Nal-toon will make sure that it is so.

Veil made no attempt to remember the many bends and sharp turns in the *streets* Reyna used to bring him from the *airplane* fields to the Nal-toon; there had been no need, for Veil does not travel on *streets*. He had carefully noted the position of the setting sun—first at the *airplane* field and again at the place where he had found the Nal-toon. The two sightings are all he needs, and he knows the precise direction in which he must travel to reach the *airplane* fields. The sun, and the stars at night, will guide him there.

It is night now, and the full moon is partially obscured by clouds. With *Centralpark* free of *Newyorkcities,* he goes to the pool to drink and wash himself. Once again, as on other still nights, he hears the roar and cough of great hunting cats; the sounds seem close, to the east. Veil has become increasingly puzzled by the sounds, for they would seem to indicate that there are hunting cats in *Newyorkcity*; yet he has never found any spoor.

The *clothes* given to him by the missionaries have become shredded and filthy, an affront to his senses. He removes them, washes them as best he can, and, from the strips, fashions a loincloth, a cloak to ward off the night chill, and a carrying sling.

He walks to the crest of a hill and takes his bearings, using a tall *building* in the distance as his first landmark. He carries enough strips of dried dog meat in his sling to last many days; he wishes he had an egg in which to carry water but he does not, and he does not dwell on the problem. Water seems to be plentiful in *Newyorkcity*.

Drenched in moonlight, Veil stands perfectly still for a few minutes, closing his eyes as he offers thanks to the Nal-toon and prays for a safe journey home so that his people may survive. Then he hitches his sling with its precious contents over his shoulder, grips his spear in his right hand, and starts down the hill.

He retraces his original route, skirting the large, open meadow by moving, as silently as his moon-shadow, through the encircling trees. Finally he comes to a wide, stone path which he must cross. He crouches, listening, but can hear nothing but the intermittent whine of *cars* on the *street* a hundred or so running-steps to his right. He straightens up and steps out onto the stone path.

Suddenly two *Newyorkcities* leap out from behind a tree.

"Hold it, turkey!"

Veil stops and assumes a fighting stance. He knows that he cannot hope to escape with the Nal-toon in the sling weighing him down, and so he will have to fight. He waits calmly, body half turned and spear arm cocked, as the warriors approach. Veil is relieved to see that the men carry only knives and not bang-sticks.

"Hey, Mason! Will you look at this turkey? He's gotta be stone crazy."

"Fuckin' loony, all right."

The taller of the two men approaches, waving his knife back and forth in front of his body, then stops a few paces away from Veil. *"What's in the sack, man?"*

Veil cannot understand the warrior's words, but their threatening tone is unmistakable. He considers his op-

tions, then decides that it would be better not to battle the two *Newyorkcities* if there is any way to avoid it. To fight, he must set down the Nal-toon, and he does not wish to do this. Also, a wound—even if not fatal—could force him to go to ground again in *Centralpark*, perhaps for many more days. He wants to go home. Courage, he thinks, must always be tempered by wisdom.

"Let me pass," Veil says evenly, using his free hand to make the sign of truce used by both K'ung and Bantu.

The short man frowns. *"Christ, Blade, you ever hear anyone talk like that?"*

The other man shakes his head. *"I ain't sure it's real talk at all. I think he's just makin' crazy noises."*

"Hand over the sack, man!"

"Hey, watch out for that pig-sticker he's got."

"Shit. I'm gonna hang that spear on my wall. You circle around on his ass. First one with an open shot cuts out the fucker's heart."

Veil shifts his weight to his opposite foot and hefts his spear as the short man begins circling to his left. The *Newyorkcities* are leaving him no choice, he thinks. Their intentions are clear, and he wastes no further time in waiting. Suddenly he leaps forward, thrusting the spearhead through the taller man's throat.

Anticipating a knife thrust from his left flank, Veil spins away from the expected direction of attack, freeing the spearhead from the dead man's neck with a flick of his wrist. He ends in a crouch, weight slightly forward on the balls of his feet, spear held ready to impale the other attacker.

But the second man makes no move of any kind. He stands very still, hands shaking at his sides as he stares in horror at the nearly decapitated body spouting blood over the stone path.

"Shit, man, you killed him! You killed Mason!"

Veil takes two running-steps and thrusts with his spear. The man screeches and tries to twist away, but the spearhead slices into his shoulder. Veil pulls back the spear, and the man slumps to the ground. Veil leaps into position to make a kill-thrust, but the pitiful helplessness and strange

behavior of the man cowering on the stone path makes him hesitate.

The *Newyorkcity* warrior is crying. His face is wet with tears.

"Holy shit. You gonna kill me too? Don't kill me, man. I'm really sorry."

At first Veil is confused by the tears in the man's eyes, then he is disgusted; never before has he seen a warrior weep. "I will not kill you," Veil says contemptuously as he picks up the knife the man has dropped and puts it into his sling. "Give thanks to the Nal-toon."

Immediately dismissing the battle with the two *Newyorkcities* from his mind, Veil moves across the stone path and into a thin line of trees. There he crouches and peers over the top of the stone wall that separates *Centralpark* from the rest of *Newyorkcity*. The *street,* filled with *cars* when he first ran across it, is now almost empty.

Veil climbs over the wall and races across the *street* to a dark area between two *buildings*. He presses back against one of the *buildings* and waits, watching and listening. There are no shouts or wailing sounds, no sign that anyone has seen him.

He goes on, sprinting from one shadow-area to another, until he eventually finds his way blocked by a *building* unlike any he has seen before. It is not as tall as many of the others he has passed, but it sprawls for a considerable distance to both the north and south, blocking his path. *Newyorkcities* in white *clothes* go in and out of its many openings.

He finds a way around the *building,* then turns east again. He walks across a stone field filled with empty *cars,* climbs over a metal barrier, and drops to the grassy earth on the other side. He crosses a very wide *street,* then crouches and stares in awe at the vast, swiftly moving body of water Reyna had called a *river.* He has never imagined there could be so much water in one place, water that seems to flow forever, with no beginning and no end.

In the middle of the *river,* directly in his path, is land with *buildings* on it. He must somehow reach that land, Veil thinks; the sky is beginning to glow, and he needs a

place to go to ground during the day when the *Newyork-cities* come out.

He has no idea how deep this *river* is; the water is too murky to tell. However deep it is, it must be crossed. He will have to wade and trust in the Nal-toon to see him safely across. He is running out of time.

The *river* may well come up to his neck, Veil thinks, and he does not want the Nal-toon to get wet. He removes the sling from around his neck, wraps it tightly around the Nal-toon, the spear, and the knife. Holding the bundle above his head, he begins to walk down the steep incline leading to the *river.*

He has only gone a few steps when he slips on wet stones and plunges into the water. His mind screams in panic as foul-smelling water closes over his head, blinding him, filling his nose and mouth. He stretches his legs, frantically searching for a bottom that isn't there. Now he will die, Veil thinks; he will sink forever and be buried beneath this depthless *Newyorkcity river.*

However, despite his panic, Veil has never lost his grip on the Nal-toon. Now God slowly begins to carry him back to the surface.

Veil is choking, but he manages to control his cough reflex and hold his breath as he clings to the *clothes* in which he has wrapped the Nal-toon. After a few moments his head pops above the surface. Coughing and choking, swallowing water, he heaves his body across the Nal-toon, wraps his arms around God, and holds on. The choking spasms pass, and Veil frantically gulps air while he breathes a prayer of thanks to God, Who is now transporting him across the *river* on His back.

But then Veil realizes that a great effort on his part is still required; there is fantastic power in the movement of the *river*'s great, wet body, and that movement is carrying him to the south. If he does not fight that power, Veil thinks, he will be carried past the land and helplessly swept down the middle of the *river,* where the *Newyork-cities* will easily kill him with their bang-sticks.

Ignoring the pain in his left arm, Veil uses it alone to grip the Nal-toon. He lashes out with his feet and beats at

the water with his free hand, struggling with all his might against the force of the *river*. The muscles in his arms and legs begin to burn, but he struggles even harder; he closes his eyes and increases the tempo of his thrashing. When he opens his eyes and glances up, he finds he is only a short distance from the land.

Suddenly he is caught in a small tidal whirlpool and spun around. He reaches out with his hand—and his fingers catch in a crevice between two large rocks. With his last strength he pulls himself in to the land. He clambers up over rocks, then falls, gasping for breath, on dewy grass.

He is cold and thirsty. He does not want to drink any more of the foul-smelling water, for he fears that it may be poisoned. However, he feels that he has no choice but to slake his thirst now, while he has the chance, for he has not passed a single spring and he has no idea where the *Newyorkcities* draw their water. Having caught his breath, he lies on his belly on the rocks and drinks; the water tastes terrible, but it dulls his thirst.

Veil rises, turns, and starts to walk toward the nearest *building*. He has gone only a few steps when he stops and tenses as a sleepy-looking *Newyorkcity* emerges from one of the *buildings* and begins walking almost directly toward him on one of the stone paths. Veil grips the shaft of his spear but does not draw the head from its wrapping of *clothes*.

The man barely glances at Veil. *"Good morning,"* he says, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

Veil senses no threat in the man's tone or bearing, and he allows him to pass by. "Go in peace," he says softly.

It is growing lighter. Veil puts his bundle under his arm and moves toward a space between two *buildings*.

"Hey, you! Where the hell do you think you're going?"

This voice, coming from Veil's left, is definitely threatening. Veil quickly places his bundle on the ground, pulls the spear free, and wheels to find a *Newyorkcity* warrior, dressed in blue *clothes* and carrying a bang-stick, running toward him. Knowing that his spear is useless against a

bang-stick, Veil picks up the bundle and sprints in the opposite direction, along the side of the *building*.

"Stop, you son of a bitch, or I'll shoot your black ass!"

Veil rounds the *building*, races to the end, turns left, and runs down a lane of grass bounded by the *river* and the *building*. He sees a narrow opening, ducks into it. The passageway reeks of rotting, unburied scraps of food, but there are piles of battered metal objects behind which he can hide. He crouches down behind three of the objects and waits, spear held ready, certain that he can kill his attacker at close range.

The enemy warrior appears at the entrance to the passageway a few seconds later. The man's face is flushed, and Veil can hear the breath rasping in his lungs. The hand holding the bang-stick is shaking as the man moves slowly into the passageway.

Veil is about to leap out and hurl his spear when the warrior suddenly stops. He wipes a glistening sheen of sweat from his face, then begins to back away.

"Shit. I'm not about to risk my ass on a part-time job. Fuck him."

Veil smiles grimly and allows himself to relax as the *Newyorkcity* disappears from sight. He rearranges his bundle into a sling that he can once again carry around his neck, then looks up and squints into the bright sunlight at the end of the passageway. The light makes his head ache and his eyes burn. He is beginning to feel sick and dizzy, and he knows that he must quickly find a place to go to ground.

Directly above his head is a metal structure with small platforms that project from the side of the *building*. He might be able to go to ground on top of the *building*, he thinks. He leaps for the bottom of the metal structure, grips it, and is pleasantly surprised when a portion of the structure swings down, making it simple for him to climb; as he does so, the bottom portion of the structure swings back into its original position.

Veil lies down on the sticky, pebbled surface on top of the *building* and stares out over *Newyorkcity*. This land is so vast, he thinks, so strange. In all directions, *buildings*

thrust toward the sky; countless *cars* speed along on countless *streets,* which crisscross and stretch into the distance as far as he can see. . . .

Suddenly, without warning, his entire body spews sweat, and he feels his insides begin to churn. Something is terribly wrong with him, Veil thinks, and he quickly removes his cloak and loincloth so as not to soil himself. Then he vomits, and he continues retching long after there is nothing left in his stomach. He collapses on his right side, gasping for breath—and then the process begins all over again.

At last, exhausted and barely able to see, Veil drags himself away from the soiled area, then collapses in a pool of his own sweat and passes out.

• • •

In Veil's dream, his Toby awakens groggy and disoriented. Then he remembers: The *Newyorkcities* are after him and he is sick—probably from poisoned water. But he must go on.

Veil tries to stand but cannot. He loses track of time as he lies sprawled on the hot surface, only half conscious. His flesh burns, and he cannot remember ever being so thirsty; he is so thirsty, Veil thinks, that he would even drink more of the poisoned water—if only he could get to it.

He must go on. If he remains where he is, the *Newyorkcities* will eventually find and kill him. He must go on. Suddenly it is night, although Veil's Toby does not remember sleeping. He does not know how much time has passed since he climbed to the top of the *building,* and his fever-thirst is now so great that his swollen tongue fills the back of his throat, making it difficult for him to swallow and breathe.

He stinks of sickness.

"Give me strength, Nal-toon," he murmurs.

He struggles to his knees, then laboriously rises to his feet. Sweat oozes in great drops from his pores, rolls and gathers into a shining film; his flesh steams in the cool

night air. He sways, but manages to remain standing, leaning on his spear for support, he hitches the sling over his shoulder and staggers across the top of the *building* to the metal structure. Slowly he descends, concentrating intently on each hand- and foothold.

On the ground he moves unsteadily off to his left, then crosses a narrow *bridge* that spans this arm of the *river*. The sight and sound of the water playing against his jagged thirst is almost overwhelming, but Veil now has second thoughts about drinking it; the Nal-toon will not reward him for stupidity or weakness, he thinks, and he must search for sweet water to cool his fever and purge his body. He manages to align himself with a chosen landmark, staggers on.

Eventually he staggers into a small clearing surrounded by trees. However, the area is too small to offer sanctuary—most of it is open, in full view of *Newyorkcities* in *cars* on the *bridge* overhead.

Veil moves around the perimeter of the clearing, then stops and begins to tremble with hope and anticipation when he hears the sound of splashing water. He moves quickly toward the sound and discovers, near a tree, a strange structure of stone and metal. Water spouts from the center of the structure. He has no idea where the water comes from, for he can see no spring anywhere nearby. He assumes it is but another example of the *Newyorkcities'* magic, a place where *Newyorkcities* drink. This water will be sweet.

When he has looked around and satisfied himself that there are no *Newyorkcities* in the area, Veil moans and runs to the water. Supporting himself with his hands against the stone base, he thrusts his face into the cool, cascading water and drinks.

He drinks until he vomits, then repeats the process again and again; he knows that he must purge his body of as much of the poison *river* water as possible. Eventually he begins to drink more sparingly. When he has finally slaked his thirst, he uses handfuls of the clear water to wash his body.

For a few moments his head clears and his vision snaps

back into sharp focus—but then his vision again blurs, his head throbs, and his body breaks into a sweat. He leans against the stone-and-metal water structure until a spell of dizziness passes. He drinks again, then starts off on a line of march parallel to the *bridge* overhead. He knows that he must find sanctuary before the sun rises, or he will be finished.

Veil passes out of the clearing and finds himself in a maze of metal *buildings*, much smaller than those on the other side of the *river*. In agony, he struggles on, moving in a pain-blurred, staggering, slow-motion race against the glow of approaching dawn.

Finally he comes to a barrier of woven metal strands stretching north and south as far as he can see. On the other side of the barrier are long, rectangular, wooden objects that sit on metal *wheels* but are not *cars* or *Land-Rovers*; there are more of the objects than Veil can count, and all of them rest on twin strands of thick metal that weave and crisscross one another like the sand-tracks of many desert snakes.

He has found his sanctuary, Veil thinks. He can hide inside one of the wooden structures. But first he must find a way to get past the barrier, which has countless little knives running along its top.

If he cannot go around or climb over the barrier, Veil thinks, then he must dig his way under.

He waits for an attack of nausea and dizziness to pass, then moves slowly to his left, studying the ground. When he sees what appears to be a patch of soft ground, he drops to his knees and begins to dig with his knife and scoop with his hands. He frequently has to pause in order to catch his breath, but he eventually manages to dig a trench beneath the barrier; he slides under, dragging his spear and carrying sling after him.

As Toby walks unsteadily toward one of the railroad cars, Veil leaves the K'ung, rolling away from the dream and floating up through sleep toward his own dawn.

Chapter Eight

Veil, feeling emotionally drained and physically exhausted from his dream-trek, signed in with the security guard at the north entrance to the missionary college complex, then headed toward the faculty dormitory. He met Reyna, approaching from the opposite direction, on the sidewalk outside the building.

"Good morning," Veil said with a smile. "If you don't mind my saying so, you really look like hell."

The frail woman with the large, soulful eyes managed to smile back. "Hi. You don't look so hot yourself."

"I think we've both had a rough night, each in a different way."

"Toby . . ."

"I know. I listened to the news reports. He's been sighted in all five boroughs, as well as in Connecticut. A man in New Jersey swears that Toby materialized in his living room and stole his stamp collection. Obviously, Toby's been busy. He's also now a national celebrity, with offers from all three networks to foot his legal expenses in exchange for exclusive rights to his story. I'm sure if Toby

knew about all the deals that were being cooked up on his behalf, he'd hurry right in."

"It's not funny, Veil."

"Toby's situation isn't funny at all," he replied evenly. "I think the reaction of the public and media is."

"There's mass hysteria, Veil. There are vigilante groups forming."

"That isn't funny, either. You've been out looking for him, haven't you?"

Reyna nodded wearily. "Veil, forgive me. I don't mean to be rude, but I'm very tired."

"Reyna, I think I have a pretty good idea where you've been looking." Veil removed a folded map from the back pocket of his jeans, held it up. "We should talk. I think it's time we started working together."

Reyna's eyes darted back and forth between Veil's face and the map in his hand. Her own face reflected consternation at first, then suspicion and fear. "How did you—?"

"Just a second," Veil said softly, quickly replacing the map in his pocket as he glanced over Reyna's shoulder and saw a black, unmarked police car pull up to the curb ten yards behind her. "We've got company. Just take it easy, Reyna, and stay cool. I'll handle Mr. Nagle. Trust me."

Reyna wheeled around and stiffened when she saw Carl Nagle and Vahanian emerge from the car. Her hand, cold and dry, reached out for Veil's, and he gripped it. Nagle's face flushed when he saw Veil. The big man started forward but stopped when his partner calmly stepped in front of him, blocking his way. There was a whispered but heated conversation, during which Vahanian's view appeared to prevail. Nagle threw up his hands in a gesture of frustration, but he stepped back and leaned against the rear fender of the car while Vahanian came down the sidewalk to Veil and Reyna.

"Good morning," the olive-skinned, husky detective said. His smile revealed even, white teeth.

"Good morning," Veil replied, his voice flat.

"Miss Alexander, may we talk?"

"If you'd like." Reyna's fingernails were digging into

Veil's flesh, but her tension was not immediately apparent in her voice.

"Perhaps we could go up to your apartment?"

Reyna quickly shook her head. "There's no need. I've already told you all I know."

Nagle, still extremely agitated, abruptly pushed off the fender and poked a thick index finger through the air in Veil's direction. "You can go, Kendry!"

Veil looked at Reyna and winked. "Do you want me to go?"

"Please don't go," Reyna said in a small voice. "Not while he's here."

"I'll stay," Veil announced to the huge detective.

Nagle started to come down the sidewalk but stopped when Vahanian wheeled around and vigorously shook his head. Nagle hesitated, then turned and went back to his previous position.

Vahanian turned back to Reyna. "Will you tell me where you've been?"

"I've been walking all night. When I heard the news about Toby, I got upset and couldn't sleep."

"Strange I didn't see you in Central Park."

"Why is it strange? By the time I heard the news, he was already gone from Central Park—at least, that was the report."

"Miss Alexander, I'm going to ask you the most important question up front. Are you now hiding, or did you ever hide, the African somewhere?"

"That's a ridiculous question."

"The man's a total stranger to this culture and environment. I don't understand how he could have remained free and survived this long without help."

"God is helping him."

Vahanian grimaced. "The idol? Don't tell me *you* believe—"

"God, Lieutenant, not the Nal-toon."

"Then God is going to be in trouble with the Criminal Justice System of the State of New York."

"In which case it's the State of New York that's in trouble."

"I find it unlikely that God would help a killer who's a fugitive from justice."

"Toby has killed twice—both times in self-defense. He and his people have been terribly wronged. I don't believe he's guilty in the eyes of Our Lord."

Veil gave Reyna's hand a reassuring squeeze, then released it and casually strolled down the sidewalk toward the police car. Nagle saw him coming, and the detective's doughy face creased in a puzzled frown—although the raisin eyes remained as dull as stone. Veil stepped into the street, walked around the car, and leaned on the trunk across from Nagle.

"It's a pain in the ass having to drag Vahanian around with you everywhere, isn't it?" Veil asked in a low voice.

Nagle's mouth was slightly open. He shook his head, blinked slowly. "What did you say?"

"Do you believe in mental telepathy?"

"Kendry, what the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm trying to read your mind. What I pick up is that you're thinking that it's a pain in the ass to have to drag Vahanian around. If you were alone, you'd just drag that girl into the car and beat whatever information you want out of her."

Suddenly the tiny eyes came alive, seemed to grow larger as they glittered like polished agates. The muscles in Carl Nagle's jaw contracted so quickly that his teeth came together with an audible click. He started to walk around the car, a movement that caught Vahanian's eye and caused the other detective to glance up sharply.

"Kendry, I'm warning you—!"

"No, I'm warning you," Veil said in the same low, even tone as he turned his head, smiled, and nodded at Vahanian. "If you come any closer, I'll do more than make you toss your cookies; I'll kill you. At my trial I'll bring up the fact that you killed Vito Ricci. I'll also mention the matter of you being on the Mafia payroll for years, acting as an enforcer. You're a rapist and sadist, Nagle, and my guess is that your victims will come forward in a flood once you're dead. Then, of course, I'll get off on self-

defense, since your partner and the woman can see that you're about to attack me. Do I have your attention, Carl?"

Veil waited for a response, but there was none. It was as if his words were a kind of sound-Medusa that had turned Carl Nagle to stone. The detective was standing perfectly still, rigid, and the life had once again gone out of his eyes; he seemed to be staring through, or somewhere beyond, Veil.

"Outstanding," Veil continued. "Even though you appear vaguely catatonic at the moment, I'll assume that your ears still work. That bushman is still on the loose—but you're not going to kill him, and you're not going to get your hands on the idol. Now, I know that you're in trouble with your Mafia bosses, and I know that they're counting on you to get that idol for them. Tough shit. The price for having me mind my own business is for you to take a walk from this case. I don't give a shit how it's done, but do it; have a heart attack or something. Now get in the car and wait there like a nice policeman."

Nagle's eyes went slowly out of focus as his hand slowly moved toward his gun. Vahanian had stopped talking, and both he and Reyna were staring anxiously at Nagle and Veil.

"Carl, you'll be dead before you can pull the trigger," Veil said easily. "You know it's true; you can feel it in your guts. Now get in the car."

Moving like an automaton, Nagle turned, walked back around the car, and got into the rear. He sat very straight, his back not touching the seat, and blankly stared ahead. His face was the color of rotten meat.

"All finished, Lieutenant?" Veil asked as Vahanian hurried up the street toward him.

Vahanian said nothing. He glanced through the windshield at his stricken partner, quickly looked up at Veil, then got into the car behind the wheel and rolled up the windows. Veil watched as Vahanian tried to talk to Nagle, but the other man remained trapped in his raging prison of silence. Again Vahanian, a puzzled expression on his face, glanced at Veil, who smiled, nodded, and waved.

Vahanian abruptly turned the key in the ignition and drove away.

"What on earth did you say to him?" Reyna asked as Veil walked over to her.

"Nothing, really, just trying to make friends." Veil removed the map from his pocket. "Will you invite me up to your apartment?"

"Yes," Reyna replied quietly. "Of course."

He followed Reyna into the faculty dormitory, up three flights of a narrow, wooden staircase, and into a small but brightly decorated one-bedroom apartment. There were a number of paintings, most of them reflecting religious themes. On one wall hung a huge crucifix. Another wall was covered by a montage of photographs of Reyna as a child, a man and woman Veil assumed were her parents, and a gathering of tribesmen he recognized as K'ung.

Reyna went into the kitchen to make coffee. When she returned, she found Veil leaning on a table; before him was a section of a map of New York City—Manhattan, with Central Park as its rectangular, emerald-green heart.

"Toby went into the park here," Veil said, pointing to Fifth Avenue and Sixty-ninth Street. "I think we can assume he also came out about the same place, since the mugger was killed near there. He stayed in the park, near water and living on, say, dog meat until his wound had healed sufficiently for him to travel. Now he knows where he wants to go—or he *thinks* he knows where he wants to go. There were reported sightings all over the city, but most of those are due to the mass hysteria you mentioned." Veil paused and moved his finger to the island in the middle of the East River. "One of the reports came from a security guard on Roosevelt Island. That, I believe, was the only accurate sighting. There's no way of knowing how he got across the river; he certainly didn't get swimming lessons in the Kalahari. He could have crossed hand over hand on the tramway cable or managed to float across on debris. He may even have floated across on the Nal-toon. What I am sure of is that he's heading southeast. He's clever and incredibly strong-willed; if he needed to get across the river, he'd have found a way.

"I know a few things about so-called 'primitive tribesmen,' Reyna. Toby may be a savage on the loose in the city, but he's not *lost*—at least not in the sense that he's forced to wander around aimlessly. This is a man who can hunt for days in open desert and still find his way back to his tribe's camp. The sun was low in the sky when you picked him up, and it didn't set until just after you'd reached Victor's gallery. The setting sun is the only point of reference Toby needed to orient himself."

Veil unfolded another section of the map, which showed the borough of Queens. With his index finger he traced along the red line he had drawn from Roosevelt Island through Queens to a large *X* in the middle of a purple patch of color next to Jamaica Bay.

John F. Kennedy International Airport.

Veil glanced up at Reyna, who slowly nodded. "You do know," Reyna said softly. "Poor Toby. He thinks that all he has to do is get back to the airport in order to be transported home."

"As in most primitive tribes, K'ung learning is probably almost entirely experiential and literal. Toby will use what he knows, just as he does in the desert. In Toby's mind a plane—something he probably thinks of as magical, a device provided for his personal benefit by the Naltoon—brought him here, so one will be waiting to take him home—if he can get to the place where it's kept. Getting there is the trial that you mentioned."

"Yes." Reyna sighed as she sat down on the floor and rested her head against a table leg. "I believe that's what Toby is thinking, and what he's trying to do. But then, I know the K'ung very well. You don't. How did you come up with this idea?"

"Dreams. Deduction. Knowledge flying on the wings of imagination. Just a bit of inspired guesswork. His route is thirteen miles as the crow flies, which is precisely the way he'll be going. We have to find him before someone else does, or before he shows up at JFK and tries to walk on a plane."

"He'll be very careful, Veil. He'll move slowly. During

these past weeks I've been back and forth over that route, trying to find Toby, but also to leave totems—signs, warnings—that he can read. I'm hoping he'll read the totems, have second thoughts about what he's trying to do, go to ground, and wait for me to come around. But I don't think he will."

"I wonder what shots he had before he left."

"Lord, Veil, that's been one of my biggest concerns. He's probably already sick. He knows absolutely nothing about this environment. He'll continue to kill dogs or cats for food, which is all right, but there's no telling what he's been drinking or what he *will* drink. He has no resistance to most of our diseases, and whatever inoculations he was given will give him only limited protection. When Toby's thirsty, he drinks; he knows nothing about typhus. He could have drunk from the East River, or even from some sewage outlet." Reyna paused, looked up at Veil. Tears welled in her eyes, flowed down her cheeks. "I'm afraid that if Toby gets sick, he'll go to ground until he gets better—or until he dies."

"Well, we'll just have to find him. Will you trust me now?"

"Yes."

"Will you let me help you?"

"Yes, Veil. Thank you."

"At least it's not all bad news. If we're right about his thinking and his plans, there couldn't possibly be a better route in all of New York City for him to follow. Look at it: He's got the railroad yards in which to hide, and then—assuming he can get through the Sunnyside section of Queens—he's going to run into hundreds of acres of cemetery. After that he's got the Long Island Expressway to cross, but then he's back into another cemetery—and a golf course after that. He's back in the open then, and probably finished, but six miles of good cover in the middle of New York City certainly isn't bad. I'll have to remember to congratulate Victor on having his gallery on Sixty-ninth Street; the angle of the setting sun from there is what gave Toby this route."

"It's a miracle, Veil."

"You'll get no argument from me." Veil reached down and stroked Reyna's hair. "You get some rest. I'll come back later this afternoon and we'll talk about the most efficient way to hunt for Toby. I'll pick up a portable tape recorder. You can tape a message. That way we can split up and cover more territory. I know he won't come to me, but at least he can hear you talking to him while I look for signs."

He turned and headed for the door.

"Veil?"

He turned with his hand on the knob. "Yes?"

Reyna got to her feet, then studied him in silence for a few moments. "I have a confession to make," she said at last.

He smiled. "I can't wait to hear what it is."

Reyna tugged at the sleeve of her blouse in a gesture that had by now become familiar to Veil. "Toby isn't the only man I've been looking for over the past weeks. I've also been searching for Veil Kendry."

Veil felt the muscles in his face stiffen, and his smile vanished. "I don't know what you mean, Reyna."

"For one thing, I've been back to the Raskolnikov Gallery to look at your work. You called them 'dream-paintings,' and now I see what you mean. They're haunting and beautiful, Veil—unlike anything else I've ever seen."

Veil began to relax. "Thank you."

"They're 'real,' but not quite real—like a dream. And you dream like that because of the brain damage you mentioned?"

"Yes."

"I've also been reading up on the war in Vietnam."

Veil felt his stomach muscles begin to flutter. "Why have you been reading up on the war?"

"I used to date a history professor at Columbia. His specialty is Southeast Asia, and he has a rather peculiar—at least, I used to think it was peculiar—obsession. He'd heard stories about a man—an American—fighting with

the Hmong tribes in Laos as part of the CIA's secret war against the Pathet Lao. This man—he was said to have blond hair, incidentally—must have been a CIA agent, as well as a regular Army officer, because the CIA controlled everything that went on in Laos and Cambodia. My friend told me that this blond-haired man—if there ever was such a man, and my friend was never certain—had become a legend. None of the tribesmen my friend interviewed knew the man's name, but other research led my friend to believe that his code name may have been Archangel. As the legend goes, this man had won virtually every medal there was to win while he was fighting with the Special Forces in Vietnam. Then—"

Veil held up his right hand, palm out. It was at once a simple gesture yet complex, inasmuch as it involved a number of Zen teachings in the art of projecting mental force. It stopped Reyna cold. She closed her mouth in the middle of a sentence, then stared in bewilderment into the eyes, suddenly grown cold, of the man standing in the doorway of her apartment.

"I think we have enough to concern ourselves with, Reyna, without getting sidetracked into talking about Vietnam or half-baked war stories. I've heard dozens of stories like the one you're telling me. They're all nonsense."

"Veil, I feel very strange."

"You're tired. You need some rest."

"This was important. It was something I wanted to share with you, because you seem so much like this man. My friend says he's sure—"

Veil slowly moved his hand back and forth, and Reyna again fell silent. Veil was aware that at the moment he seemed a stranger—and, perhaps, a bit frightening—to Reyna. It was what he wanted. "Don't stalk me, Reyna. Please. No good will come of it."

CHAPTER NINE

"Veil, darling," the voice on the intercom intoned sweetly, "are you in the mood to receive a visitor?"

"It depends on who it is, Chuck."

"The sweet man says that his name is Gabriel Vahanian, and he has the *prettiest* detective's badge. He's a real hunk, Veil."

"Anybody with him?"

"Nope. He's alone."

"Send him up, Chuck. Thanks."

Veil slipped the tape recorder he had purchased under his platform bed, draped all of his canvases, then walked across the spacious loft and pulled open the sliding door. Vahanian, looking tired and anxious, emerged from the elevator. Veil stepped aside and motioned for the detective to enter.

"What's the story on the fag and the other four guys down there?" Vahanian asked as he looked around the sparsely furnished, paint-splattered loft.

"That 'fag' is a friend of mine who would have done you

very serious damage if you'd tried to come up here without permission or a warrant. He and the others are occasional students of mine."

"Karate?"

"Martial arts in general. Karate is just a name for a rather specific Japanese system."

"I'd heard you were pretty good at that stuff. I didn't know you were an instructor."

"I'm not. For every eight hours they stand guard, I give an hour to share some of the things I know."

"Eight hours for one; that's expensive time."

"They're not complaining."

"Who teaches you?"

"A barber, a tugboat captain, and a stockbroker. Sometimes, when I'm judged particularly worthy, there is a special session with a fifth-grade teacher who flies in from Seattle to teach me."

"What things make you particularly worthy?"

"I never know. When I do know, I'll join their ranks."

"Kendry, I don't understand what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about secret knowledge."

"Where did you learn your basic skills?"

Veil did not reply.

Vahanian stared hard at Veil. "You used what you know to do something funny to Nagle at the gallery, didn't you?"

"I don't know what you mean. The good detective had been drinking and he threw up. I was just trying to come to the aid of an officer of the law."

"Bullshit."

"Whatever you say."

"Do you always keep bodyguards outside your loft?"

"No."

"Why now?"

"I've been suffering from anxiety attacks. Why did you come to see me, Lieutenant?"

Vahanian took a deep breath, slowly let it out as he ran his fingers through his thick, black, wavy hair. "Sorry if I sound snappish, Kendry. I've been up twenty-four hours."

"It's okay."

"We're not enemies, are we?"

"I don't like the company you keep."

"Neither do I. Believe me, it's not by choice."

Veil shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned, we're not enemies."

"I came to ask you a question, which I hope you'll answer."

"Let's hear the question."

"I'd like to know what you said to my partner."

"Oh, that. I told Nagle I knew he was a Mafia enforcer, rapist, child molester, and all-around sadist. I also mentioned, in passing, that he had executed Vito Ricci, that he was on the Mafia's shit list for his somewhat excessive behavior, and that for an act of penance he's supposed to make sure that the Nal-toon is delivered safely to any one of the remaining five families. I very politely asked him to decline the Mafia assignment and request transfer to another case, since the K'ung obviously need the idol more than the Mafia does. That's about it. Is he still upset?"

Vahanian seemed stunned as he stared at Veil, his mouth slightly open, his breathing rapid and shallow. "You got anything here to drink?" he said at last.

"Scotch or bourbon?"

"Bourbon."

"Water? Ice?"

"Neat. A big one, if you don't mind."

Veil went into the kitchen, removed a bottle of bourbon from a cabinet, and poured a heavy tumbler half full. When he returned to the other room, he found Vahanian sitting on the floor, back braced against one of the support pillars that ran down the center of the loft.

"Cheers, Lieutenant," Veil said as he handed the drink to the detective. "You'll excuse me if I don't join you. It's still early, and I've got things to do."

Vahanian downed the drink in three quick swallows, then set the glass down on the polished hardwood floor. "I'm with the New York State Police, Kendry, on special assignment to the NYPD. I've been investigating Nagle for

close to a year, and I only know maybe half of what you just told me."

"So the NYPD is on to Nagle?"

Vahanian nodded. "They've suspected for some time, especially since the last big problem he had. But it's tough to nail him down. He's very good at what he does, Kendry, and he covers his tracks well."

"Oh, he has great technique. It's called terror."

"Are you sure of your information?"

"Yes."

Vahanian studied Veil for a few moments, then nodded. "I can see that you are. Will you give me the name of your informant?"

"No. I won't even confirm that I got the information through an informant."

Vahanian sighed with resignation. "One of the biggest problems we've been having is getting anyone to testify against him. Terror isn't the word for what Nagle instills in his victims—and we suspect there are a lot of them. Do you know of anyone who might be willing to come forward?"

"I might. But I wouldn't even think of mentioning this person's name until you have Nagle nailed down tight. Sorry, Lieutenant, but Nagle's your problem."

Vahanian rose to his feet, straightened his sport jacket. "Judging from the presence of those bodyguards downstairs, I'd say he's also your problem."

"I don't think of Nagle as a problem."

"You know, the attitude of the police department in this city toward you is very ambivalent."

"I don't consider that a problem, either."

"May I ask what your interest in this matter is?"

"I don't really have an interest. I'm just a friend of Reyna Alexander's."

Vahanian grunted with disbelief, then headed toward the door. "Thanks for the drink."

"Lieutenant?"

The detective turned, raised his thick eyebrows slightly. "What is it, Kendry?"

"Information for information? Now I'd like to ask you a question."

"Let's hear the question," Vahanian replied with a thin smile.

"I know that Nagle was ordered to execute Vito Ricci, because it was Ricci who was responsible for trying to squeeze the Nal-toon through an otherwise secure smuggling pipeline. Do you know why Ricci did it?"

Vahanian shook his head. "Not really."

"Not really?"

"No. To tell you the truth, we—or I, at least—don't really care what Ricci was up to. My assignment is to help the NYPD get Nagle. As far as the city and state are concerned, we'd just as soon all those Mafia bastards shot each other out of existence. Still, for what it's worth, Intelligence did pick up rumors that the heads of the other five families were planning to shut him down—forcibly retire him, you might say. Hell, he was pushing ninety. Maybe he went senile."

"Thanks, Vahanian."

The detective hesitated a moment, then came back across the loft and extended his hand to Veil, who gripped it. "You watch your ass, Kendry."

"I have some very skilled friends watching my ass for me, Lieutenant. You're the one riding the back of the tiger. You watch *your* ass."

"I will. See you."

"See you."

• • •

"Veil!"

Veil turned off his flashlight, crossed the width of the empty boxcar in two long strides, and leapt through the open door. He hit the ground in full stride, darted between two uncoupled cars, and ran toward the sound of Reyna's voice. He rounded a car, slowed when he saw that Reyna was not in danger.

Reyna was thirty yards farther down a stretch of empty track, crouched down beside the rails and staring at

something on the ground. Veil jogged down the tracks, squatted beside Reyna—and winced.

Two broken teeth jutted from the middle of a pool of dried vomit that was marbled with streaks of blood. More blood had stained the surrounding gravel a dull brown.

"Toby's sick," Reyna said, her voice catching. "And he's hurt."

"Take it easy," Veil whispered, taking Reyna into his arms. "We don't know for sure that it's Toby's."

"It's Toby's," Reyna said, her voice thick with grief and anxiety. "I know it's his. It's on the route." She drew a deep, shuddering breath. "The vomit isn't that old. Toby was here."

Veil led Reyna a few yards away from the spot, then held her until she stopped trembling. He gently sat her down on a rail, then slowly walked up and down the tracks, studying the ground. Fifteen yards to the right of the vomit he found wood splinters and a streak of white powder.

"Reyna," Veil said evenly, "please come here."

Reyna rose and walked unsteadily to Veil, who handed her a few of the wood splinters. "What do you think?" he continued. "Could these be from the Nal-toon?"

Reyna studied the splinters, turning them in her fingers, smelling them. "Three of them are," she said tightly. "You can still smell the campfire smoke, and they're bleached from heat, sand, and wind. The other two aren't."

Veil wet the tip of his index finger, touched it to the white powder, then put his finger to his tongue. Instantly the tip of his tongue went numb, and the back of his throat was filled with a bitter, medicinal taste. "Well, I'll tell you what this is," he said, spitting out the taste. "It's pure heroin—top-quality white stuff, not the Mexican brown." When Reyna didn't respond, Veil turned and looked up at her. The woman was standing very straight, eyes closed, hands curled into fists at her sides. "Reyna?"

"What?" the woman responded through clenched teeth.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said, turning away.

Veil rose and brushed off his jeans. "Vito Ricci's old-age pension award to himself," he said absently. "This certainly shows the old man wasn't senile. He wasn't about to be dependent upon the kindness of strangers—or his former business partners. He was just a little bit stupid and a big bit unlucky."

"What are you talking about?" Reyna asked in a subdued voice.

"Vito Ricci is the man who tried to slip the Nal-toon through the Mafia's smuggling pipeline."

"Because of the heroin inside." Reyna's voice now sounded haunted.

"Of course. He cared nothing for the idol; in fact, he probably didn't even know what it was. What he did care about was the fact that he was being pushed out of the organization. These people eat their own. Ricci was justifiably afraid of not only losing everything he had, but also of being killed in the bargain. So he made a private deal—a huge one—on his own, enough in itself to get him killed if it were found out. Ironically, whoever was handling things for him on the other end must have thought that a statue like the Nal-toon was a perfect item in which to send the heroin to Ricci; after all, the Nal-toon was just another piece of primitive art. Who would even notice it, much less bother to try to trace it? Just hollow out the statue, fill the space with a few million dollars' worth of pure heroin, drop it in the pipeline as a 'personal' item for Ricci, and forget about it."

"Lord knows what Toby will think when he sees that stuff trickling out of the Nal-toon," Reyna said in the same haunted voice. She swallowed hard, rubbed her eyes. "He'll die if he eats it, won't he?"

"If he eats enough of it, yes—which might not be too much. It's incredibly pure." He watched as Reyna bowed her head and clasped her hands in prayer. He waited a few moments, then stepped close to her and touched her shoulder. "Reyna," Veil continued quietly, "I don't mean to be insensitive, but prayers aren't going to help Toby now."

"That isn't true, Veil," Reyna whispered without opening her eyes. "Toby is sick, he's badly injured, and the Naltoon is filled with death that Toby is almost certain to think is something else, some gift sent to him by the Naltoon. God's intervention is Toby's only hope now."

Veil gripped Reyna's wrist and gently but firmly pulled her back along the way they had come. "Pray on the way to the cemetery," he said curtly.

• • •

It was dark when Veil drove the rented car back over the Queensborough Bridge into Manhattan. He glanced sideways at Reyna and could see that she was barely able to hold back tears. "Tomorrow's another day," he said softly. "We'll go into the other cemeteries—New Lutheran and Zion. We'll just keep at it until we find him."

The tears finally came, and Reyna brushed them away with the back of her hand. "What haunts me is the possibility that we could have passed within a few feet of him, and Toby was passed out or too sick to respond."

"It's possible, sure—but it's just as possible that he's farther to the southeast, gone to ground in one of the other cemeteries. Or he's simply ignoring us because he's not ready to come out yet. The good news is that if we can't find him, it's not likely that anyone else will, either."

"Until he comes out below the golf course," Reyna replied hoarsely. "Somebody will be sure to spot him, and he'll be trapped. I told you he won't be taken alive, Veil."

They drove in silence for almost ten minutes before an accident in the center and outside lanes of the FDR Drive brought traffic to a crawl. Veil looked at Reyna, who was sitting bolt-upright in her seat, staring straight ahead. In her face was a terrible fear, and Veil suspected that it was more than fear for Toby. He said, "Let's talk about a gutsy friend of mine by the name of Reyna Alexander."

"Thank you for calling me your gutsy friend," Reyna mumbled in a flat monotone, "but let's not talk about me."

"I think it's time, and I think you want to. Let's you and I

exorcise a few of your ghosts—and I'm thinking of a big, fat, ugly one in particular."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Veil reached across the seat and plucked at the left sleeve of Reyna's beige, long-sleeved blouse. "There are needle tracks under there, right?"

Reyna's head snapped around, and her eyes were wide in terror before an old haunt. "Yes," she breathed, and in the sound of that one word was a universe of guilt, shame—and relief.

Veil edged over into the inside lane where traffic had slowly begun to move past a cordon of blinking lights from a patrol car and tow truck. "Jesus, Reyna, I hope they're not fresh."

Reyna shook her head. "They're not. It's been years."

"How did it happen?"

"Veil, I really don't want to talk about it."

"Yes, you do. Tell me about it."

There was a prolonged silence. Veil waited, certain that the words would eventually come—and they did.

"I told you I was twelve when my parents died," Reyna said in a low voice. "It was in the Kalahari, with the K'ung. A warrior party of Bantu attacked. It was . . . horrible. My parents went down in each other's arms while they were being . . . poked to death by Bantu spears. Poked to death. All over."

Veil reached out for Reyna's hand and squeezed it tightly.

"I escaped by running into the desert," Reyna continued. "By that age, I was at home almost everywhere in the desert. I had enough lore to find my way back—except that I didn't want to find my way back. I was out of my mind with terror and horror, and all I wanted to do was die. I almost did. I had no water, and after a while I just lay down in the trough of a dune. Toby came after me and found me. He'd brought a water-egg for me. They carry water in ostrich eggs, you know."

"I know," Veil replied softly. "It was in the newspaper articles."

"Toby half dragged, half carried me back to the camp. By then the battle was over. The Bantu had been driven off, and the K'ung—out of respect for my feelings—had already buried my parents. They'd even . . . even . . ."

"Reyna?"

Reyna sobbed once, then brought herself back under control. "They'd even made a cross out of firewood and put it up over my parents' grave. In all the time—the years—that my parents had spent with them, with all the subtle and not-so-subtle proselytizing they'd done about Jesus Christ, this was the first time the tribe had shown even the slightest interest in the meanings or symbols of Christianity. They'd loved my parents, Veil, even as my parents had loved them."

"Yes. It doesn't surprise me."

"The wireless in the Land-Rover was broken, so there was nothing to do but wait. After two call-ins were missed, the Missionary Society had the South Africans send out a helicopter to check on things. They found me and took me back to Johannesburg." Reyna paused, sniffed. "Toby saved my life, Veil. It's so terribly important to me that I save his."

"I understand. What happened to you after they took you out of the desert?"

"It's pretty much as I told you. I became a ward of the Missionary Society. I was given the best schooling, then brought back here to attend college. But I couldn't get those . . . images out of my mind. Always, night and day, I would have these flashes of memory, see my parents holding on to each other while they went down under the spear thrusts . . ."

"It's okay, Reyna. It's over now."

"Yes. Except . . . like you, I guess, I was an extremely troubled adolescent. I'm ashamed to say it, but God wasn't enough solace for me in those days. Nothing seemed to be able to block the memories—except drugs. Eventually I became hooked on heroin."

"And you were eventually arrested by Carl Nagle."

Reyna uttered a sharp cry, then doubled over in her seat

and clutched at her stomach, as if a knife had been plunged into her. "It was horrible, Veil. Horrible. He did things . . . I don't think I'll ever feel clean again."

"You're clean, Reyna," Veil said gently as he stroked her back. "The sin and the filth are his, not yours. Know that and accept it."

Veil continued to stroke Reyna's back, and finally she began to relax. She sighed, straightened up. Then she took Veil's hand, kissed it, held it up to breast. "I guess you could say that my experience with Nagle was almost therapeutic," she said with a quick, nervous giggle. "That . . . man was so terrible, fear of him became even stronger than my craving for drugs. The Society stood by me, of course. They put me in a rehabilitation program, supported me all through withdrawal. But I swear it was fear of *him* as much as any treatment program that kept me off drugs after that." Reyna let herself fall over onto Veil, who wrapped his arm around her. "I'm still so afraid," she added quietly.

The security guard at the gate recognized Reyna and waved Veil through. "Don't be," he said as he drove slowly through the narrow streets of the campus. "I have a strong feeling that Mr. Nagle's clock is about to be cleaned good for him. I wouldn't be surprised to see him put out of everybody else's misery permanently."

Reyna shuddered, the muscles in her body rippling like a physical prayer. "Why do you say that?"

"It's just a strong notion. Nagle's not going to bother you again, Reyna."

"Oh, Veil," Reyna breathed into his side. "Can you promise me that?"

"I promise you that."

Veil parked the car at the curb in front of Reyna's dormitory, got out, and walked around the car to open Reyna's door. Reyna stepped out, clasped both of his hands in hers. Suddenly she seemed older—no longer a frightened child but a beautiful woman who was still very anxious but far more in control of her fears. Even her face looked fuller, as if her body had gained weight with the

unburdening of her soul. She was, Veil thought, quite lovely.

"Veil, thank you so much."

"For what?"

"For somehow understanding that I needed to talk about that—even now, in the midst of all this other terrible business."

"It's precisely because of all the other things going on that I knew you needed to talk. There were a lot of things pressing on you besides Toby's situation. It was time to ease some of that pressure and show you that you don't have to carry it alone."

Reyna grinned coquettishly. "Are you interested in sin?"

"Not nearly as much as I am in salvation."

"Would you stay with me tonight?"

"If that's what you want, it would be my distinct pleasure."

"We're between summer sessions, so there aren't too many people in there. Still, we'll have to be *very* quiet. Do you think that two skilled trackers like you and me can manage to make love in near silence?"

Veil smiled as he put a finger to his lips. Then he put his arm around Reyna's shoulders and led her up the walk toward her dormitory.

Chapter Ten

Veil dreams.

Veil is Toby.

He turns his head at the sound of barking and sees two large dogs bounding toward him from his left. Dazed, Veil clutches his sling and stumbles toward the opening in the wooden object. As he reaches it he drops his spear, braces his forearms on the raised wooden floor of the object, and makes a desperate attempt to heave himself up to safety. Suddenly he hears a man shouting somewhere above his head, and Veil cringes; but the unseen *Newyorkcity* seems to be shouting at the dogs, hurling things at them in an effort to scare them away.

Veil glances up at the *Newyorkcity* who has saved him, and he sees a short, heavy man dressed in ragged *clothes*. Without warning the man's foot shoots out and catches Veil on the jaw and the side of the head.

"Get out of here, you son of a bitch! You'll have every railroad cop in the yard down on us!"

"I'm sick," Veil whispers, still hanging on to the plat-

form. He can see nothing now, and his head feels as if it is about to explode. "I need . . . help."

A second kick knocks Veil to the ground. Dimly, through a shimmering orange haze, Veil sees the blurred images of two men emerge from the hole of darkness above his head. The *Newyorkcities* have him now, he thinks. He is finished.

But they must not get the Nal-toon.

Veil rolls to his right. He pulls the sling from around his neck and uses the last of his strength to hurl the Nal-toon into the darkness beneath one of the wooden structures. Then he passes out.

• • •

There is too much pain in this dream, Veil thinks. Too much misery and loneliness in imagining himself as the K'ung warrior-prince. He does not want to suffer like this, and he starts to roll away from the dream of Toby, drifting off toward the Lazarus Gate and the woman he loves trapped beyond it. Then he stops. His suffering is only imaginary, while Toby's is real. Only by entering the mind of Toby can he hope to understand what the man is thinking and perhaps anticipate his actions.

". . . Veil, come to me. Love me. Tango with me on the edge of time. . . ."

". . . Can't . . ."

". . . You don't have to suffer like this . . ."

". . . Dream is the key to finding him, must . . ."

• • •

Veil returns to Toby, once again becomes Toby as a squealing blade of sound seems to slice through his brain. He senses movement all around him, and he shakes his head in an effort to clear it.

The Nal-toon! he thinks. Where is the Nal-toon?

He lifts his face from the gravel and turns his head in time to see that the wooden object under which he lies is moving over him; one of the metal *wheels* is rolling toward his stomach, and in a moment he will be cut in two. . . .

Veil pushes against the ground with his hands, rolls to

his right, and lies flat between the thick strips of metal. A moment later the heavy *wheel* grinds over the place where he had been.

The air is filled with nerve-shattering sound, but Veil is virtually oblivious to it; he feels the hard, familiar surface of the Nal-toon pressing against his ribs, and joy floods his being. Still keeping himself pressed flat to the ground as more objects roll over him, he reaches out and wraps his arm around God. As he does so, he feels a thin stream of powder trickling from His base.

The blood of the Nal-toon! Veil thinks, turning his head and gazing in awe at the white streak on the ground. It is a bad sign; he has failed, and his punishment will be death in this terrible, flickering tunnel of darkness, movement, and noise.

Then the darkness suddenly lifts, and the great roar dissipates, leaving Veil and chasing after the wooden objects as they move away. Bright, hot morning sunlight beats down on his back.

The Nal-toon has spared him!

Despite nausea and a hammering pain on the left side of his head where his eye is swollen shut, Veil manages to struggle to his feet. Cradling the Nal-toon in his arms, using the palm of his left hand to stem the flow of God's blood, he staggers toward the open, black maw of another wooden object. He knows there could be danger in the darkness, perhaps more *Newyorkcities* waiting to attack him, but he feels that he has no choice but to take the risk. He must find a place to hide.

He reaches the opening, sets the Nal-toon down inside, then pulls himself up over the lip of the floor. He lies on his back for some time, too weak to move, gasping for breath. Finally he manages to roll away from the light at the opening. He listens, but there is no other sound in the darkness; he is alone and safe. He is still under the protection of the Nal-toon.

He puts his hand to the left side of his face where the *Newyorkcity* kicked him. Pain stabs through his skull and flashes behind his eyes as his fingers touch the tender,

puffy flesh. He is sick, Veil thinks, is missing teeth, and he cannot see out of his left eye. But he is alive, and besides, he has suffered worse. Long thirst in the desert is worse. This would not be a worthy trial if there were not some suffering demanded of him. The only important thing is that he continue to think and act as a warrior.

"Thank you, Nal-toon," he murmurs.

Now his thoughts turn to the strange, powdery blood of God. It is a good sign, not bad, Veil thinks with growing excitement. Since it is obvious that he still enjoys the Nal-toon's favor, it seems possible that the Nal-toon has provided His white blood as a gift to help him.

Gritting his teeth against the fierce pain that whipsaws back and forth behind his eyes, Veil rolls over on his side. He sits up and carefully, reverently, examines the Nal-toon and the white blood trickling from His base. God must be providing him with this blood for a reason, Veil thinks, but he does not know how it is meant to be used. However, it is certain that any gift flowing from the very heart of the Nal-toon will be far more powerful than anything he has ever known; it will have to be used with great care.

Veil tears off a piece of *clothes* from his sling and uses it to stop up the flow in the Nal-toon's base. Then he carefully sweeps the blood that has already flowed onto the wood into a small pile. Uttering a prayer, he pinches some of the powder between his thumb and forefinger and puts it on his tongue. The blood has a bitter taste, like a medicinal herb. He takes a slightly larger pinch, puts it to his nose, and sniffs.

Immediately a sensation of warmth sweeps up through his nostrils and flows like warm water behind his eyelids. A few seconds later, to Veil's amazement, the pain in his face dulls, receding to a tiny point somewhere inside his left ear.

The Nal-toon's blood acts like shilluk, Veil thinks, and his heart pounds with excitement. Except that the blood is many times more powerful than shilluk. Now he knows that the Nal-toon has given him His blood in order to ease

his pain, and it is meant to be sniffed in very small amounts.

As if to reaffirm his new knowledge, Veil takes a slightly larger pinch of the Nal-toon's blood-shilluk and breathes it into his nostrils. The residual pain in his left ear blinks out as a pleasing sun-warmth oozes down through his entire body. He hears a sound like the rustling of wind in the desert; the wind is filling him, lifting him off the ground. He is floating away . . .

Enough! Veil thinks. The Nal-toon's gift must be used with as much care as water in the open desert.

The pain has disappeared, and despite the odd sensation of floating, Veil is no longer nauseous. None of the magic machines the Nal-toon has given the *Newyorkcities* can compare with this wondrous gift, he thinks. He cannot remember ever feeling so at peace.

Veil eases himself down on his stomach, rests his head against the Nal-toon, and drifts off to sleep within sleep.

• • •

It is night when Veil awakens, as Toby, in his dream; once again he is nauseous and in excruciating pain. He vomits, and this causes new club-blows of pain to hammer against the left side of his skull.

Moaning in agony, he searches in the darkness until he finds a few grains of the Nal-toon's blood-shilluk. He hurriedly sniffs some from the palm of his hand and immediately begins to feel better. He starts to inhale more, then stops himself. He will take only as much as he needs to ease his pain and sickness, Veil thinks; to take more, to deliberately seek euphoria and the comfort of sleep, would be to abuse this most wondrous gift. Also, he must remain conscious now; it is night and he must move on.

Replacing the carrying sling around his neck, Veil eases himself to the ground. His stomach knots with anxiety when he looks up at the sky, for clouds obscure the stars. His sickness has disoriented him, causing him to lose

track of the direction in which he must go in order to reach the *airplane* fields. He needs the stars.

The stars in the sky over *Newyorkcity* are different than in the sky over the desert, he thinks, and it is often difficult to see them through the background of lights and the haze of smoke that chokes the air of this strange land. But the configuration of the stars, though different from those at home, remains consistent, and that is all he needs in order to orient himself. But he must be able to see them.

He leans against the side of the wooden object and waits, trying to remain calm. He is certain that the Nal-toon will soon clear the sky for him, and his faith is rewarded; soon a wind rises from the north and begins to blow the clouds across the sky. Veil gains his bearings from a brief glimpse of the stars, and a short time later clouds blow back over the moon, shrouding him in darkness.

He retches again. When the spasms pass, Veil carefully removes the piece of *clothes* covering the base of the Nal-toon, then allows a small amount of the precious blood-shilluk to flow into his palm. He inhales the powder and, as before, his pain and nausea immediately disappear. It is a fine night, Veil thinks. It is good to be alive, under the Nal-toon's protection.

• • •

Time has lost meaning. Veil moves slowly, wearily, staggering from side to side. He constantly has to remind himself not to test the Nal-toon's mercy by being careless, and yet he is only dimly aware of entering an area of more *streets* and *buildings*.

He almost weeps with joy when he comes upon a wooded area that seems almost as densely forested as *Centralpark*.

He enters the jungle on a stone path, passes through a copse of trees, and finds himself at the edge of a clearing filled with stone totems. These totems are different from the one his people erected on the graves of Reyna's parents, Veil thinks, but he instinctively senses that they

are death-totems. He is in a jungle where the *Newyork-cities* bury their dead.

His first reaction is fear, for in his feverish state he imagines that he can see the spirits of dead *Newyorkcities* hovering over their totems. Then he reminds himself that he is under the protection of the Nal-toon; no spirit will attack a warrior moving under the protection of God. His fear passes.

In a spirit of thanksgiving and respect, and to assure that the *Newyorkcity* spirits do not betray his presence, Veil sets about constructing his own small peace totems. When his closed left eye begins to throb, he sniffs more of the Nal-toon's blood-shilluk. He finishes his totems in a state of pain-free euphoria.

Within a short time he has found an area suitable for going to ground. There is a shallow stream nearby; Veil lies down in its clear waters, occasionally drinking as he allows the water to cool his burning flesh.

He uses a sharp-edged, flat rock to scoop out a shallow trench in the soft, cool earth on the stream's sloping bank. He anchors the surrounding soil with sticks and rocks, then devises a cover of leafy branches woven together with vines and supple twigs. Finally Veil settles down in the trench with the Nal-toon close to his belly. He pulls the woven cover over him and rests his head on a soft, leafy mat he has woven for that purpose. Feeling pain and nausea, he sniffs more blood-shilluk and closes his eyes, enjoying the feeling of sanctuary and the warm sense of well-being that the Nal-toon's gift brings him.

He realizes with some surprise that he is not hungry, despite the fact that he cannot remember when he last ate. Hungry or not, Veil thinks, he must eat to keep up his strength. He will stay in this jungle of the dead until he feels better. Here he can snare small game and fashion new weapons.

Veil allows himself the luxury of sniffing more of the precious blood-shilluk, and he drifts away like a leaf rolling in a gentle breeze.

• • •

Veil is no longer concerned with the passage of time. Far more important to him is the fact that the blood-shilluk seems to have dried up his insides, for he no longer suffers such severe bouts of vomiting and diarrhea. However, he remains very weak, and he finds it difficult to hunt for food. Despite his weakness, he does manage to snare a rabbit and a large rat.

Veil imagines that he can feel some of his strength returning—but very slowly. The swelling on the left side of his face has gone down, and his left eye has opened, although the vision in that eye is so blurred as to be useless. He manages to fashion new weapons: a bow, its wood flame-hardened and strung with thin, plaited vines; arrows with flame-hardened tips dipped in his own waste; a throwing stick.

But he is not recovering as quickly as he thinks he should. Every labor is an immense effort requiring deep concentration and exercise of will; he suffers terrible headaches, and the flesh on the left side of his face burns when he touches it. He begins to fear that his continuing sickness and pain are at least partially the result of some *Newyorkcity* magic spell that is draining his strength, and it is only the Nal-toon's blood-shilluk that is keeping him alive in this place.

He has confirmed his suspicion that the Nal-toon's gift is very dangerous if used in excess—it brings deep unconsciousness, which, however pleasant, could prove deadly to him, inasmuch as it renders him totally vulnerable to his enemies. Thus he is now constantly on guard to use the great gift sparingly, only on those occasions when his sickness and pain seem unbearable, or when his bowels loosen, or when the ache in his head threatens to blind him in both eyes.

He has also begun to notice another effect of the blood-shilluk: When he goes too long without using the gift, he experiences sharp stomach cramps.

At last he decides that he is simply not going to grow

stronger as long as he remains where he is, possibly being drained by a *Newyorkcity* magic spell. Despite his terrible weakness, Veil resolves to move on at nightfall.

• • •

Later in this dream-day Veil is aroused from his stupor by the sound of a voice. A woman is speaking his language.

Reyna.

He should trust her. He should go to her. She will help him.

No.

Overwhelmed by loneliness and longing at the sound of his own language, Veil begins to weep soundlessly. He has never been so sick or weak, and he comes very close to removing the woven cover over his head and revealing himself.

No.

If the *Newyorkcities* can cast a spell to drain his strength, Veil thinks, they may also be able to raise spirits from this jungle of the dead to try to trick him. Even if the voice is really Reyna's, there is always the possibility that she means to betray him. The voice could be but a part of the trial set by the Nal-toon, and Veil feels that he cannot afford to take a chance.

No.

Veil wriggles even deeper into his trench. He holds the Nal-toon tightly in an attempt to banish his loneliness. Faced with the possibility that he is being hunted by spirits, he is now firmly resolved to move at nightfall, no matter how weak he is. He must get to the *airplane* that will take him home.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Veil waited, back braced against a tree trunk and hands thrust into the pockets of his jeans, as Reyna slowly approached through a field of small, uniform grave markers. She looked pensive, Veil thought, but not as distraught as she had appeared earlier. Throughout the morning they had walked, together and apart, through Calvary Cemetery, with Veil playing a recording of Reyna's voice while Reyna called out—and sometimes sang—in the K'ung tongue. They had made no attempt to track Toby, only to announce their presence. Then Reyna, fearing that Veil's presence would frighten Toby, had gone off alone.

She had been gone almost an hour and a half, and from the way she walked, Veil felt certain she had found something.

"He's been here," Reyna announced as she came up to Veil, wrapped her arms around his middle, and rested her head on his chest. In her voice was relief, mingling with anxiety and fatigue.

"You're sure?" Veil asked.

"Yes," she said, freeing one arm, turning and pointing to the north. "He came in around Fifty-first Street, just below Queens Boulevard. I found one of his footprints on some bare ground. He's sick, so I guess he can't help being careless."

"That's good news," Veil said quietly. "Just so long as he doesn't become too careless."

"Um-hmm." Reyna again wrapped both arms around Veil, and he eased them both down until they were sitting on the ground. For a few minutes Veil thought the woman might be sleeping, but then her voice came to him, muffled slightly by the material of his light jacket. "I don't know whether or not he's seen any of my totems, but I saw one of his. It's a spirit-totem erected to show respect for the spirits in a place of the dead. Toby recognized this as a cemetery."

"But no sign of Toby himself?"

Veil felt Reyna shake her head. "I found the place where he went to ground. There's a stream beyond the woods behind me."

"I know. I saw it."

"That's where he rested—near the bank." She paused and looked up at Veil. "There were feces and vomit around the site, as you would expect," she continued with a slightly puzzled frown. "What's surprising is that the feces aren't as loose as you'd think they would be in somebody suffering from typhus or dysentery—or both. We know he's very sick and badly injured. Lord, the very fact that he can still walk at all is amazing. He must have a very high fever and be in terrible pain."

"It could be the heroin," Veil said as he absently stroked Reyna's hair.

"What?"

"The heroin, Reyna. Toby may have accidentally found how to use it in a way that can benefit him. It's true that it wouldn't take much of it to kill him, but it's also true that if he, say, sniffs a small amount at a time, he'll get the benefit of its medicinal properties. Heroin is an unbelievably potent anesthetic, of course, but it also tends to dehydrate. It would tighten his bowels somewhat. In this

case, the crap inside that idol could be Toby's salvation—at least for a time."

"But how could he know to sniff it?"

Veil shrugged. "It comes from the Nal-toon, right? It's a divine gift, so he has to do *something* with it. It tastes like hell, so he must have tried smelling it and gotten some into his nose. Bingo."

"If that's true, Veil, then it's another miracle."

"Mmm. What do you think the chances are that he'll come back there?"

"No chance. If Toby intended to use that place again, he'd be there now—during the day. He was there last night, but he's someplace else now. Sick or not, Toby feels that he must keep moving as best he can." Reyna sighed, rose to her feet, and brushed off her jeans. "Rest time is over. I'm going ahead."

"Let me come with you," Veil said, rising. "I'm not the tracker you are, but I'm not bad."

"Indeed," Reyna replied impishly, rising up on her toes to kiss him. "You're not bad at anything. Still, you'd only frighten him, and I don't want you getting a spear in the belly button. Sick as he is, he probably hasn't gone far. You wait here, I'll be back."

• • •

Veil glanced at his watch; it was almost six-thirty. He cursed softly under his breath, then set off at a quick pace through the field of grave markers. He passed through a stand of trees, jumped over a stream, and hurried toward the southeast end of the cemetery. He sighed with relief when he saw Reyna sitting on the edge of a low stone wall that marked the border of the cemetery. Behind her, traffic moved by on Fifty-eighth Street. Stripped of the muffling effect of the trees inside the cemetery, the air was filled with the groaning hum of rush-hour traffic on the Queens leg of the Long Island Expressway.

"I was worried about you," Veil said as he sat on the wall next to Reyna. "You've been gone all afternoon."

"I'm sorry," Reyna replied, squeezing Veil's hand. "I've been waiting. I think you passed Toby somewhere back

there. I wanted to come back and get you, but I was afraid to take a chance that he might get spooked and slip out ahead of us at this end."

Veil raised his eyebrows slightly, then shaded his eyes from the slanting rays of the setting sun and looked back the way he had come. "You're sure he's still back there?"

"Not a hundred percent, maybe ninety. After I left you I did a quick walk-through to this end. I figured that if I found sign here, it would mean that he was still ahead of us and we wouldn't waste time looking any longer in this cemetery. Anyway, as you can see, there's a lot of bare ground down here at this end. I couldn't find any tracks."

"Granted that he's sick, hurt, and moving very carefully, it's still only a mile, maybe less, from the stream to here. You'd think he would have come farther during the night."

Reyna twisted around to look at the expressway and the embankment beyond. "I know. Just because I couldn't find sign doesn't mean that he's still back there."

"We still have a couple of hours of daylight left. If you want to go into Mount Olive and look around, I'll stand guard here."

"It's a thought," Reyna said absently.

"It's your decision, Reyna."

"We'll both wait here," Reyna announced decisively. "By the time I get started over there, it will be dark, anyway. I still believe he's behind us. If we spread out a bit and stay through the night, we may at least keep him contained here—and tomorrow I'll go back in and really start looking. We'll keep the tape recorder running. Do you think the batteries will last?"

"I have spares in my pocket." Veil paused, turned to Reyna. "It may be time to start thinking about what we're going to do with Toby *after* we find him."

Reyna looked away. "I haven't even tried to think that far ahead."

"I'm not sure I believe you, Reyna. Even assuming that we nab him before anybody else does, we still have big problems, don't we?"

"Yes," Reyna answered softly.

"The obvious first step is to turn him in to the police

after we hide the idol somewhere. Then we mount the best possible legal defense, which I'm sure we can do considering the publicity Toby has generated."

"That's not the point, Veil."

"Prince Toby of the K'ung isn't going to fare too well when he comes up against our legal system, is he?"

"No." Reyna shuddered, then abruptly swept her hair back from her face in an almost defiant gesture. "There are two murder charges against him. The fact that Toby acted both times in self-defense and that there are extenuating circumstances won't help him escape a trial. The authorities will never allow him out on bail, which means that Toby could be required to spend months in a prison cell. And *then* he could get a prison sentence. He won't last a week in a cell, Veil. It will kill him. He'll be alone in a cage, in a place where nobody speaks his language. . . . Toby will simply refuse to eat or drink anything, and then the end will come very quickly. In his mind he will have failed, and the Nal-toon will be lost to his people forever. The will to live will drain out of him like water down a drain."

"And he could be right about the idol being lost to his people forever. Not a very happy ending."

Reyna heaved a deep sigh, then bowed her head. "Shit," she murmured dispassionately.

Veil put his hand under Reyna's chin and gently lifted her head. Her eyes were filled with tears. "We've looked at the problem and discussed it, as we had to," Veil said evenly. "We had to think a couple of steps ahead, but now it's only a waste of time to be distracted by future problems. You need to focus all your energy and concentration on finding Toby. You let *me* worry about what to do with him when you do, okay?"

Reyna stared into Veil's eyes for a few moments, then nodded and forced a smile. "Okay."

"Good!" Veil kissed Reyna on the forehead. "Now let's talk about important things. It could be a long night, and it's time to think about how to keep the members of this safari in good spirits."

This time Reyna's smile was genuine. "You're going for food?"

"Right."

"I wondered when somebody was going to think about feeding the chief tracker of this expedition."

"I propose to pick up provisions from the jungle deli, which I'm sure is only a block or two away. What will the chief tracker have?"

"Roast beef on a roll—make that two—with lettuce, tomato, and mayo. Black coffee. And watch out for unfriendly natives; since you'll be carrying the provisions, I don't want you to get mugged."

• • •

Veil ordered the sandwiches and coffee to go in a nearby delicatessen, then went to a pay phone in the corner. He dropped a quarter in the slot and dialed a number. Victor Raskolnikov answered on the third ring.

"Victor, it's Veil."

"Veil! I've been trying to get hold of you! Who's that *strange* man answering your phone?"

"A friend holding down the fort. Listen, Victor, I—"

"Have you found out anything?"

"Not over the phone, Victor. I have a strong suspicion there may be heavy ears slapped on to a few phones in the city. But I do have to talk to you."

"Okay," the Russian said evenly. "I understand. Say it the best way you can."

"Things are warming up, and they may come to a boil soon. I will have a few things to report to you."

"Excellent."

"You and I discussed the matter of compensation for my services, you may recall. I believe it will be barter, if that's agreeable to you."

"What do you need, my friend?"

"First let me give you some indication of what I want to do. I think you'd agree that even matters of vital importance can get tangled up in our legal system?"

"I agree."

"Assuming I can find the package we're mutually interested in, I'd like to dump the whole bundle in the sand—a direct drop. Anyone else interested in the package can go look for it there."

Raskolnikov's deep, booming laugh carried over the phone into the delicatessen, startling the man behind the counter, who had placed Veil's order on top of a glass display case. "I love it!" Raskolnikov barked.

"At the moment you might say I'm trapped in the bush, and I'm up to my ass in alligators. I need someone to man a control center and coordinate things. It's specialized work and time-consuming. Can you give me the time?"

"The time is yours," Raskolnikov answered uncertainly, "but I don't know much about these things."

"If you're agreeable, and if I get lucky with my quarters, a man with an ugly face, an ugly nickname, and a very beautiful heart will get in touch with you, perhaps as early as tonight. He'll know exactly what to do. You'll work together."

"It will be done, Veil."

"There's more. The ugly man will know how to take care of business, but the business may require some heavy financing. We're talking big bucks—cash—up front. I can see money down the road coming from the sale of exclusive rights to stories about the package, told by people who have been on the inside. It's exploitive, but I don't see any other way to buy all the sand we're going to need. In other words, I see no reason why you wouldn't be reimbursed, but the cash is going to be needed quickly."

"It will be done, Veil. You just concern yourself with the proper wrapping of the package. What you want is precisely what I want."

"I'll be in touch when I can, Victor. You'll stay by the phone?"

"I'm here."

"Thanks, Victor," Veil said, and hung up.

"Hey, pal!" the counterman called. "Your stuff's ready."

"In a minute," Veil said without turning, and dropped another quarter in the slot.

He spoke to his personal physician, then spent fifteen minutes on the phone talking to a friend he had not seen in six years. When he hung up, Veil was barely able to suppress laughter. The last number he dialed was his own.

"Veil Kendry's residence."

"It's me. Be careful what you say."

"Veil, darling! We've all been worried about you. Where *have* you been?"

"How are things?"

"No problems."

"Any calls? Be careful."

"A couple of miscellaneous items, Veil, but nothing you'd be interested in at the moment. Victor called."

"Got it."

"Also a couple of mystery guests—although it could have been the same person both times."

"Any clues?"

"The first mystery guest simply hung up. The phone rang again about five minutes later. There was music playing."

"Did you recognize it?"

"Verdi's *Requiem*."

• • •

Veil brought the food and coffee back to Reyna. A brief ripple of anxiety passed across her face when he told her that he had to leave for an hour or two and could not explain why, but she contented herself with asking him to return as quickly as possible.

Veil drove the rented car back into Manhattan, south to Little Italy. He parked six blocks away from the church, in an underground garage. He left the garage through a rear emergency exit and walked two blocks before ducking into an alley and waiting. When he was satisfied that he was not being followed, he walked around the block, then headed toward the church as it began to grow dark. He entered the darkened sanctuary, paused, and listened. When he heard nothing, he slipped silently into the confessional booth.

"It's me," Veil said as the wooden panel in the partition slid back.

"So you got my message," the gravelly, broken voice said. "I was hoping that you'd know it was me and realize that it was important enough for you to come down."

"Yes. I'm sorry I took so long to get here. You've been waiting a long time."

"It's all right. God and I are old friends, and we've been talking. You recall mentioning a man by the name of Gabriel Vahanian?"

"Yes," Veil said, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise. "He's Nagle's partner."

"Not anymore. He's dead."

"Nagle?"

"Yes. Nagle shot him in the ear with a Magnum. There are a lot of rumors on the street. Somebody did or said something to Nagle that pushed him over the edge at about the same time he found out that Vahanian had been asigned to spy on him. Yesterday the families made a decision to execute him, and he may have found out about that too. Whatever; the point is that he's on the run and off the leash. There are no controls on him anymore."

"I hear you, Father."

"It's come out that the idol is filled with heroin."

"Mm-hmm."

"It's white and pure; there's talk of the package being worth six or seven million dollars, depending on how it's cut."

"Does Nagle know about the heroin?"

"Probably. The information is on the street. His former employers speculate that he'll go after it on his own, since that kind of money is the only chance he has to survive. Nagle makes even these people nervous. A mad dog is not to be taken lightly, and it's rumored that Nagle has a large collection of very powerful weapons. You must be very careful, Veil."

"I will. Thank you very much, Father."

"Go with God, Veil."

• • •

"It's me."

"Veil, darling!"

"Your watch is over, Chuck. You get out of there and take the other guys off the street. Just lock up and split."

"What's the matter, Veil?" All traces of femininity had

disappeared from the voice, replaced by the hard, tempered tone of a warrior.

"The guy I told you about is on the loose and over the edge. He doesn't have to play by any rules, and he's rumored to be carrying heavy artillery. He may well come gunning for me, and he'll blow up anybody or anything in his way. I won't be going back there until this thing is over, so I don't need you any longer."

"Do you want me to gather up your paintings and take them someplace safe?"

"No. Just get out of there. Tell the other guys I said thanks, and I'll be in touch."

"Veil, there must be something we can do to help."

"No, Chuck. I can handle it."

"Indeed you can. But be certain to take care, Veil."

"Thank you, friend."

• • •

"I've been worried about you," Reyna said, wrapping her arms around Veil and squeezing him hard. "A little scared, too, I guess."

"I'm sorry I had to leave you."

"Were you able to take care of your business?"

"It turned out to be a waste of time, nothing important. No sign of Toby, huh?"

"No."

"Why don't you sleep for a while, Reyna? I've got things covered now."

"I already took a nap." She reacted to Veil's look of surprise with a shrug. "If Toby can crawl and is determined to get past us, Veil, he will; he could make a shadow seem noisy, and we can't possibly cover everyplace down here he could slip through. We can only hope that he'll stay where he is and I'll find him, or that he'll react to my presence and come to me on his own. You sleep. I'll wake you if there's a need."

"Wake me in an hour. Tomorrow could be a long day. We'll take turns resting."

Chapter Twelve

Veil dreams.

He is Toby.

He leaves his shallow trench soon after moonrise. He is naked; his *clothes,* filthy from his sickness, have been buried. He has constructed a new carrying sling from relatively clean pieces of *clothes,* and in it he carries the Nal-toon and his new weapons.

He has gone only a short distance when he realizes, with pangs of frustration and despair, that he will not be able to travel much farther. Perspiration runs in thick streams off his flesh, draining him of strength, as well as precious fluids and salt. His legs feel ready to collapse under him at any moment. The left side of his head throbs, each drum-pulse sending a blinding stab of pain down through his left eye into his neck. His bowels are constantly churning. Even the air seems to be dragging him down, like the water in the *river,* and he senses that the *airplane* fields are still very, very far away. . . .

He needs more of the Nal-toon's blood-shilluk, Veil thinks.

The amount of the Nal-toon's gift that he sniffs this time is considerably larger than what he has used in the past. However, the effect is the same; his pain abruptly vanishes. A warm, liquid sensation creeps down through his body and into his limbs, accompanied by an almost overwhelming desire to sleep.

Veil staggers and falls. A heavy, shapeless weight with wings flaps inside his skull, threatening to club him into unconsciousness. He knows that he will be in deadly peril if he loses consciousness on open ground, and he somehow manages to will himself back onto his feet.

He stumbles onto a stone path and staggers forward on its hard surface until he comes to a large meadow. By squinting, he is able to focus the vision in his right eye sufficiently to see in the moonlight a field filled with the *Newyorkcities'* spirit-totems. His knees sag, and he falls again. He sucks in a series of deep breaths to focus his energy, then somehow manages to crawl on his hands and knees through the totem field, dragging his precious bundle after him.

After what seems an agonizing eternity of dizziness and nausea, Veil reaches the jungle beyond the totem field. He feels a slight depression under his hands and collapses on his side into it. He tries to pull some leaves and branches over his body but can't seem to grasp anything with his fingers. He shifts his weight until he can feel the hard, comforting shape of God against his belly, then releases his terrible burden of will and passes out.

• • •

When Veil, as Toby, awakens, the sun is already well over the horizon and climbing rapidly into the sky. The ground under him is damp, and he is shaking with cold. His entire body throbs with pain and sickness. He cannot travel now, Veil thinks; it is day in this jungle of the dead, and there is a spirit moving around.

A voice is calling him.

The voice is Reyna's. For a long time she calls to him repeatedly, then abruptly falls silent. Then her voice

comes to him again, this time from a greater distance. She is singing a camp song of love, fire, and water. Tears spring to Veil's eyes, and he stifles a sob as loneliness and soul-pain blow through him with the sudden ferocity of a sandstorm.

Reyna sings songs of children, and Veil weeps. Reyna's voice drifts away, then comes closer again. In between songs she calls out, asking him to come to her.

Yes! Veil thinks. Enough pain, sickness, and—most terrible burden of all—loneliness. He can trust Reyna; she will care for him until he is well; she will help him return with the Nal-toon to his people. His suffering will be over. Surely he has proven himself as a warrior. . . .

A chill ripples through his body. Veil starts to roll out of the depression—then freezes.

What if he is wrong? What if his trial is not over and the voice of Reyna is really that of a *Newyorkcity* spirit calling him to doom? How can he know? Only the Nal-toon decides such things.

Deciding that he cannot risk failure simply because of personal suffering, Veil settles back into the depression and finally manages to pull some leaves over his body. He closes his eyes and reminds himself that no personal suffering is beyond endurance as long as God is with him, and God is; the Nal-toon has repeatedly provided him with sanctuary and has even given him His precious blood to ease his suffering.

Veil shifts his position slightly until he can see out through a space in his covering of leaves. He tenses when he sees blurred movement on a knoll just beyond the field of spirit-totems. He squints and is finally able to make out the figure of Reyna. She stands very still for a long time, and Veil begins to fear that she has picked up his spoor and is about to descend on him. She slowly turns in a full circle, then drops to her hands and knees and begins to crawl along the edge of the field.

Veil's stomach knots with anxiety. If the figure is Reyna, or a spirit with Reyna's skills, she will certainly find his spoor. Perhaps.

She has found it, Veil thinks as adrenaline flows into his system, sharpening his senses and reflexes. He watches with growing tension as the Reyna-figure crawls slowly through the spirit-totems, following his spoor of wet, crushed grass and leaves. Surely she will find him now.

He must quickly decide what to do.

Should he kill the Reyna-figure?

Or does the Nal-toon mean for Reyna to find him, since he has not gone to her? Has the Nal-toon sent Reyna to end his suffering and take him home?

"Help me, Nal-toon," Veil whispers. "Help me to decide."

As if in immediate response to his prayer, the Reyna-figure abruptly crawls off in the wrong direction. She stops, looks around, then shakes her head in frustration. Veil begins to relax but then tenses again as the Reyna-figure stands, puts her hands on her hips, and appears to stare directly at his hiding place.

She has found him, Veil thinks.

He will attack if she comes for him, he thinks. He will let the Nal-toon guide his muscles and reflexes, will let the Nal-toon decide whether this Reyna-figure lives or dies and whether or not he must now prepare for his final battle with the *Newyorkcities*.

Then the Reyna-figure turns and stares off in another direction. And another. Then she shakes her head again and walks quickly back the way she came, disappearing over the knoll.

It certainly was a spirit, Veil thinks with satisfaction, but he was not tricked by it. He held firm, and the Nal-toon sent the spirit away.

His loneliness dissipates as Veil begins to feel a comforting sense of oneness with God. His heart fills with joy and thanksgiving as he sniffs a small portion of the Nal-toon's blood-shilluk and drifts off to sleep.

• • •

At nightfall Veil-in-Toby rises and moves on through the jungle of the dead. He abruptly stops and drops to the

ground when he again hears Reyna's voice calling to him from somewhere in the darkness ahead of him.

He sniffs some blood-shilluk to focus his senses, then creeps soundlessly forward until he comes to the edge of a stand of trees. Before him, thirty running-steps away across an open expanse, Reyna and a man whose features are hidden by the night sit on a stone barrier. Between them is some kind of magic box that makes the sound of Reyna's voice. The box repeats the same message over and over, but Veil no longer even bothers to listen. It is silly magic, he thinks, and now that he knows it is magic, it has lost its stranglehold on his heart.

Veil moves laterally, inside the shrouding darkness of the line of trees. He fears the Reyna-figure most; if she does possess Reyna's skills, she might well see or hear him, no matter how stealthily he moves. But he goes on, moving silently past the position of the man-in-night until the sounds from the magic box can no longer be heard.

He waits, crouched behind the stone wall and peering over its edge until the *street* beyond is momentarily clear of *cars*. Then, gripping his carrying sling against his chest, he sluggishly climbs over the wall and runs as straight and fast as he can across the *street*. Fueled by anxiety, he makes it safely across the *street* and into the shadows cast by a *building*.

The effort is exhausting, and now he doubles over as his stomach muscles knot with pain. He waits for the spasms to pass, then turns and moves south along the face of the *building*, darting from moon shadow to moon shadow.

Suddenly he sees before him a great *street* that is even wider than the one he had to cross to get to the *river*. There are a great many fast-moving *cars* on this great *street*, their light-eyes cutting sharp, moving swaths in the darkness. Veil waits, but the great *street* never seems to be entirely empty of *cars*.

He could wait here forever for the *street* to empty, Veil thinks. Despite the *cars*, he must go on.

Veil eases the carrying sling to the ground, lifts the Naltoon, and allows some of the blood-shilluk to flow into his

palm. He sniffs it, but this time the pain does not immediately vanish, as it usually does. He waits for the familiar, warm rush that will wash away his terrible hurt, but it does not come. There is some easing of the pain, but Veil still feels crippled. Recognizing the danger but feeling that he has no choice, he sniffs still more of the blood-shilluk. Finally the rush comes and the pain vanishes. He replaces the Nal-toon in his sling, lifts up the bundle, then walks forward a few steps and crouches down at the very edge of the great *street.*

A cluster of *cars* speed by, leaving in their wake a relatively long stretch of darkness. There are more light-eyes in the distance, bearing down on him, but Veil feels that he must move now, for there might not be another moment of darkness as long.

He straightens up and runs as fast as he can halfway across the great *street* to a stone barrier that separates the *cars* on his side from those on the other, which move in the opposite direction. His lungs ache and his chest heaves as he gasps for air; sweat pours off his naked body and his vision blurs badly, but he knows that he cannot stop to rest. It is too easy for the *Newyorkcities* to see him in the light-eyes of their *cars.*

Everything seems to be spinning around him, but Veil somehow manages to climb over the stone wall. He stumbles into the *street,* staggers and falls. Despite the fact that he is totally disoriented, he struggles to his feet. He sways, then sits down hard with a jolt that shoots up his spine and sends shock waves of pain through his head.

Suddenly he sees the light-eyes of a *car* bearing down on him very fast. Veil wills himself to his knees, then up on his feet as the *car* emits a wave of screeching, blaring sounds like those he heard when he crossed the *street* by *Centralpark.* The light-eyes shoot toward him, then suddenly begin to veer wildly back and forth as the screeching sounds build to a deafening, almost physical thing that batters at his ears. He smells something burning. Then the sound abruptly stops as the light-eyes stop, and Veil feels the cool touch of metal against his stomach.

Veil sways as he stares, mesmerized, into the right light-eye of the *car*. Then he falls forward onto the *car*'s metal skin.

"What the fuck's the matter with you, you crazy son of a bitch? You want to commit suicide, do it with someone else!"

There is a *Newyorkcity* warrior standing beside him. The man is shouting and waving his arms, obviously threatening him.

"Please help me, Nal-toon. I cannot see well enough to fight. I am too weak to fight."

"What the hell did you say?"

"Please, Nal-toon. Have mercy one more time."

"God damn, you smell like a fucking sewer! You're on drugs, aren't you?"

Yes, Veil thinks—the Nal-toon is causing the warrior to stay his hand. Now it is up to him to summon the necessary will and strength. . . .

Veil pushes off the *car*'s metal skin. Holding his bundle against his body with both hands, he staggers the rest of the way across the *street*, stumbles over an embankment, and falls into night on the other side.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Veil awoke with a start, momentarily disoriented by the close proximity of his dream-Toby to their present position and by the fact that his dream-Toby's actions had gone far beyond anything Reyna had told him or that he could reasonably assume to have happened.

He looked around for Reyna but could not see her. There was only the sound of the tape recorder playing its loop, and an occasional *whoosh* of night traffic on the expressway. Alarmed, he leapt to his feet, looked around again, then arbitrarily chose to go to his left—in the direction of the expressway.

He found Reyna standing just inside a copse of trees, staring out over an empty expressway.

"Don't be frightened, Reyna," Veil said as he came up behind her. "It's me. What's the matter?"

Reyna pointed out toward the expressway. "Nothing, I guess. Something happened out there a few minutes ago."

"What?"

"It must have been a near accident. There isn't that

much traffic, but a dog might have been crossing. All of a sudden there was a lot of honking and a screech of brakes. I was terrified that Toby had gone around us, tried to cross the expressway and been hit by a car. I ran over here, but now I can't see. . . . Veil, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," he replied tightly.

"You look very strange."

"I was just thinking that it could very well have been Toby who spooked that driver."

"Well, we really have no way of knowing," Reyna said after thinking about it for a few moments. "We can't look for spoor until it gets light, but he couldn't have come through this area without leaving tracks. If we find any, we'll know he's gone on to the next cemetery."

"He has a few city blocks to cross before he gets there."

"Yes, but it's dark. It will be dawn in a couple of hours. He knows that, so he'll go to ground at the first opportunity—when he reaches the cemetery. What concerns me is the fact that if Toby has crossed the expressway, it means he's not paying any attention to either me or the totems I left." She paused, shrugged. "There's nothing to be done about it now. You must be hungry."

"A little," Veil replied distantly, still distracted by the overlap between the near accident in his dream and its real-life counterpart.

They walked back to their original position. Veil took a sandwich out of the bag, uncapped a container of cold coffee, then sat on the wall and began to eat. He ate in silence for a few minutes, thinking, then slowly became aware that Reyna was staring at him.

"I talked to my friend again," Reyna said when Veil glanced over at her.

Veil sipped at his coffee. "What friend?"

"The one I told you about; the one who's writing a history of the Vietnam War."

"Oh, that friend. The one who half believes in fairy tales."

"He says he's now convinced that this story about Archangel—the yellow-haired soldier and CIA agent I told you about—is true, and he's really excited about it."

"I thought we weren't going to talk about this subject anymore."

"As I recall, you asked me not to stalk *you*. Unless you're Archangel, I can't see what harm it does to talk about him. Does it bother you to have me talk about him?"

She was getting cute, Veil thought as he took another bite of his sandwich, drank more coffee, and said nothing.

"Are you?"

"Am I what, Reyna?"

"Are you Archangel?"

"I'm a painter."

"*Were* you Archangel twenty years ago?"

"Now you're stalking me again, Reyna."

"My friend says this Archangel had developed a reputation as a real crazy man, willing to do anything. He also happened to be the U.S. Army's best martial-arts expert. It seems that the Pentagon wanted to—"

"Reyna, are you very attached to this friend of yours?"

"Yes," Reyna answered after a pause. The sly, coquettish tone she had been using was gone, replaced by a note of confusion brought on by the sudden coldness in Veil's voice and eyes. "I like him very much."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"*Why*, Veil?"

"Because he's going to be dead very soon." Orville Madison would kill anyone he suspected of knowing about Archangel. And then the Director of Operations would kill him. And he would let Sharon die.

They stared at each other in silence broken only by the sound of the tape loop on the recorder and the faint drone of the small transistor radio in Reyna's pocket. When Reyna finally spoke, her tone was filled with reproach. "Oh, Veil, that's a terrible joke."

"I'm not joking," Veil responded curtly. From the moment Reyna had again brought up the subject of Archangel, Veil's mind had been working rapidly, sorting through options available to him. He'd decided that the researcher had to be stopped, if possible, and that Reyna was the most likely candidate to stop him. If Reyna were

to perform this task, she first had to be convinced of its necessity; she had to be thoroughly shaken, and he could think of nothing more terrifying than the truth.

Reyna had involuntarily taken a step backward. "Veil," she said in a small voice, "after all you've done for Toby, I'm almost ashamed to tell you this—but I have to. Sometimes you frighten me. You can go through these sudden changes; when you do, something projects out from you that another person can almost *feel*. This is the second time you've frightened me."

Veil shifted his position slightly so that the light from a nearby street lamp fell across his face and eyes. He knew very well what was projected there, and he wanted Reyna to feel its full impact; he wanted her frightened. "You don't have to be frightened of me, Reyna," he said in a low, flat voice. "But the story *I* heard about this Archangel *is* pretty scary. If it's true, it explains why your friend doesn't have too much longer to live. Would you like to hear the story?"

"I'm not sure, Veil. I . . . don't think so."

"Oh, but I think you should. If the story is true, it could be that you're the only person who can save your friend's life. I don't have the slightest idea how you'd get him to stop his research on this Archangel story, because he's obviously hyper about it, but that's what you'd have to do if you want to save his life—and others'."

"Veil, please stop. Now you're frightening me very much."

"Once—and only once—this Archangel's company commander gave him what might be considered a compliment; actually it was a half compliment. The man called Archangel the finest warrior he'd ever met, and the worst soldier to ever make it out of boot camp; apparently, Archangel didn't like to take orders. I've heard those stories about him being mad. Who knows? He may have had emotional problems caused by a handicap no one knew about. The rumors were that he was hell on wheels in battle because he was too crazy to fear death, and he loved violence—probably because it freed him from the

pain caused by this peculiar handicap. No matter. Because he didn't give a damn about anything but killing the enemy, he managed to amass more honors than any other man fighting in Vietnam. Since he was also CIA—and had been since his days in boot camp—as well as an Army captain, he was chosen by the agency to go into Laos and organize the Hmong tribes that were fighting against the Pathet Lao. Since Archangel's activities were strictly illegal, they were also, of necessity, top-secret; thus the need for a code name.

"Archangel continued his winning ways—if you can call them that—in Laos. He learned the language. He was very effective, not only as a combat fighter but also as a technician and planner. The people of the Hmong became fiercely, even obsessively, loyal to him, and he to them. In fact, he became so effective that the Pathet Lao put what amounted to a five-thousand-dollar bounty on Archangel's head—a small fortune to any Hmong, not to mention just about any native of Southeast Asia. It was never collected by anyone, although hundreds of people had opportunities. Now, that's how legends grow about madmen.

"In the meantime, Archangel was having a grand and glorious time. In fact, freed of virtually all constraints imposed by military discipline, free to do nothing but go around killing the enemy, he was—if you'll pardon the crudeness—happy as a pig in shit. And, of course, during the time all this was taking place, it was clear to everyone except a few generals and politicians that we were losing the war.

"Now, enter the villain of the piece: Archangel's CIA controller. As the story goes, this man could—if one wanted to be excessively charitable—be called a sadistic son of a bitch. He was a controller in every sense of the word; he not only wanted to control his operatives' actions, but he also wanted their souls. He enjoyed gutting people. He and Archangel didn't get on well.

"Back in the United States, a few generals and politicians had decided that all that was needed to boost public morale and rally support for the war was a bona fide

hero—someone like Sergeant York in World War I, or Audie Murphy in World War II. This person's war record would be made public, a tremendous media blitz would be unleashed, and our hero would spend the rest of the war running back and forth across the country making public appearances, talking up the war effort, that sort of thing. Archangel was the man chosen to play this public-relations hero. Understand—he wasn't chosen because he was the best candidate. True, he had the best war record—if one reduces that to counting medals, which is what was done. Also, he was deemed photogenic. But he was indeed crazy and, for the most part, uncontrollable. Archangel was chosen because his controller had done a truly heroic job of lobbying. The controller did this because his own career would be enhanced if one of his men did the job, of course, but the most important reason for the lobbying effort was the controller's knowledge that Archangel would truly detest the part. Archangel belonged in the jungle, not on television, and the thought of putting Archangel on television and the lecture circuit pleased the controller immensely.

"Archangel wasn't in a position to refuse, so he had to accept the assignment. The controller brought in a South Vietnamese colonel to replace Archangel with the Hmong—a very strange choice, Archangel thought at the time—and Archangel was sent off to Hawaii for six weeks of rest, recreation, and intensive drilling on how to become a comic-book hero. In the United States everything was being geared up for our hero's entrance onstage. It was insane, by the way, because Archangel would have lasted about a week on this trip before he broke some talk-show host's neck. But that's neither here nor there."

"He was never put in place, was he?" Reyna asked, her voice breaking slightly. In the pale light cast by the street lamp her face looked as ashen as it had when Veil had first seen her.

"Obviously not," he replied dryly. "If he had been put in place, your friend wouldn't have anything to dig for, would he?"

"What happened, Veil?"

"The story goes that Archangel—who never slept well—was walking the streets of Saigon a few hours before his early-morning flight back to the United States was scheduled to take off. He was approached by a pimp who offered him a young boy and girl for his sexual pleasure. Archangel knew the children; they were from the Hmong tribe he'd fought with."

Reyna uttered a tiny gasp, but Veil spoke through it. "When that plane landed in Washington, the entire Washington press corps, the Joint Chiefs, dozens of politicians, and no less than the president of the United States were waiting to greet Archangel. The problem was that Archangel had never boarded the plane. At the time the plane had taken off, he was in a small office in the basement of the United States Embassy in Saigon breaking the bones of his controller.

"You see, it seems that, two months before, the controller had been approached by the South Vietnamese with a problem they wanted the controller to help them solve. There was this South Vietnamese colonel who'd just about cornered the Saigon markets in drug dealing, racketeering, and pornography. He'd become a considerable embarrassment to the government, but he was from an important family; they couldn't just put him in prison. The controller was asked to find someplace to put him, and the controller thought it would be a great idea to put the colonel in charge of Archangel's Hmong tribe."

"To gut Archangel," Reyna whispered hoarsely. "To snatch his soul."

"Ah, yes. The controller knew what would happen and didn't care. Within a week this colonel had begun selling Hmong children to pimps in Saigon; within a month the entire village had gone over to the Pathet Lao. Now, in a beautiful stroke of irony, the South Vietnamese—led by the colonel—were about to make their first commando foray over the border. They planned to wipe out the village.

"After busting up his controller, Archangel stole a

heavily armed helicopter and took off for Laos. He intended to warn the village; if necessary to save the village, he intended to fight with the Pathet Lao against the South Vietnamese. He'd turned traitor. Archangel stopped the raid and saved the Hmong, but his helicopter was shot down. Like any legend, he had more lives than a cat; he survived the crash, eluded capture, and a week later came crawling out of the jungle, crossed back over the border, and turned himself in to the Americans—who now had one very large problem. Archangel was thrown into the stockade while everyone put their heads together and tried to figure out what to do with him.

"You see the problem. Literally overnight, the war hero—for whom a tremendous publicity campaign has been planned—turns up a traitor, not to mention a potential source of considerable embarrassment to the United States if he ever tells what he knows. His real identity officially hasn't been made public, but there are enough people who know it to enable some ambitious reporter to track it down. Naturally Archangel could have been put in the stockade for the rest of his life—or even shot. But then, there would be the danger of some reporter—or some historian, like your friend—taking an interest and starting to ask questions. What everyone really wanted was for Archangel to disappear off the face of the earth. And be forgotten.

"It was the controller, obviously a man with a silver tongue, who finally came up with a solution that was acceptable to the Pentagon: Simply let Archangel go—with a few strings trailing behind him. All of his military records are drastically altered, and all of his honors taken away. Then he's given a medical discharge as a psycho. His end of the deal involves keeping his mouth shut and thus avoiding summary execution on some street corner. Needless to say, the whole public-relations idea was dropped."

"Oh, Veil." Reyna sighed.

"Oh, but there's more. As always, Archangel's controller has his own angle. Archangel has just about ruined this

man's career, as well as put him in the hospital. The controller wants revenge, and—with the Pentagon's acceptance of his plan to set Archangel free—he thinks he has it. He knows just how crazy and violent Archangel is, and he thinks that the worst punishment that can be inflicted on Archangel is to set him free, to cut him loose from the armed forces. As a civilian, Archangel will have no franchise to wreak destruction. With no way to calm his demons, Archangel will self-destruct, end up killing himself with booze and drugs, or simply die in some alley. And to make certain that Archangel understands the name of the game, the controller imposes his own private penalty: Archangel is given an indeterminate sentence of death. He will be placed under constant surveillance by the controller's men, and he's informed that if the day ever comes when he finds peace of mind or true happiness, that will be the day he takes a bullet through the brain."

"Veil," Reyna whispered as she took a tentative step forward, "that's a terrible story."

Veil held up his hand, stopping her. "It's a story that can't be told, Reyna. After all that's come out since the end of the war, the story of Archangel wouldn't seem like such a big deal. But it's still a very big deal to the controller, who survived the damage to his career and now occupies a very high, and very sensitive, post in the CIA's Operations Division. He can't afford even to be identified, much less embarrassed. All the old rules, including Archangel's death sentence, still hold, even after all these years. Without realizing it, your friend has been busily tripping any number of invisible alarm signals. Believe me, the controller knows exactly what your friend is up to, and your friend is damn lucky he isn't dead already. In any case, he soon will be if he doesn't drop the project—and that includes burning his manuscript and any research records he's kept. The manuscript and records will be destroyed in the end, anyway; it's a question of whether he does it himself or lets his assassins do it for him."

Reyna drew in a deep breath, then threw her head back and defiantly brushed a strand of hair away from her face.

Then she pushed Veil's hand aside, stepped forward, and wrapped her arms tightly around his waist. "You *are* Archangel, aren't you?"

"If I were," Veil said quietly as he stroked the woman's raven-black hair, "it means that your friend can get me killed too. And you, since he's got such a big mouth—and these people hear everything. Do you understand?" He waited until he felt Reyna's head nod. "Good. We're going to have to find a way of convincing your friend to stop writing about Archangel if he wants to save his ass. And my name can't even be breathed."

"Yes, Veil. I do understand."

"Let me think about the problem. You'll do the groundwork, and I may follow up by scaring the shit out of him—without hurting him or letting him know who I am."

Reyna lifted her head and parted her lips slightly. Veil was about to lean over and kiss her when the shots rang out.

Veil immediately leapt to the ground and listened. There were more shots—rifle fire and what could have been the cough of a shotgun. The sounds were carrying on the night air from somewhere across the expressway, to the southeast.

"It's Toby!" Reyna screamed.

"Take it easy," Veil said, holding her tightly. "It may not be. The police wouldn't just start shooting like that unless they were returning fire, and Toby wouldn't know what to do with a gun if he had one."

"They're *vigilantes*, Veil! I *know* they've got Toby down there! They're killing him!"

"Not yet, they haven't," Veil said flatly as he started to lead Reyna out of the cemetery and toward the car. "If they'd killed him, they wouldn't still be shooting. Don't panic. If he's dead, there's nothing we can do about it. If he's alive but in trouble, it won't help him if we panic. We'll get in the car and head over there. Turn up that radio."

Veil quickly led Reyna the half block to where the car was parked. He eased Reyna into the passenger's seat,

then slid in behind the wheel and started the engine. The firing had stopped abruptly—something Veil regretted, for he now had nothing to guide him to the site. He pulled out onto Fifty-third Street and turned right, heading for the overpass that would take him to the other side of the expressway. As he approached the intersection, an unmarked police car with a portable flasher on its roof sped through the intersection from Veil's left, barely missing the front of his car.

With his right hand Veil reached across the seat and braced Reyna as he floored the accelerator and twisted the wheel to the right. The well-tuned car responded instantly, screaming around the corner on two wheels. The car bounced down, fishtailed, then straightened out as Veil sped down the street after the police car.

"Good grief," Reyna murmured through clenched teeth.

Veil glanced at the speedometer; they were going sixty miles an hour and still gaining speed. "Brace your hands against the dashboard," he said evenly.

Reyna's face was bloodless, but her mouth was set in a determined line. "What will he do if he sees you chasing him?"

"Nothing, I hope. He'll probably assume I'm another cop. In any case, he's not going to stop for us."

The deadly popping of gunfire had resumed; it was closer now, somewhere in the streets off to their right. Veil kept the accelerator to the floor as he sped across a bridge. The car hit the peak of a shallow crown, soared through the air, then slammed back to the ground. The gap separating him from the police car had narrowed to a few yards, and the back of the driver's head was now clearly visible.

Suddenly Reyna clutched at Veil's arm with both hands, almost causing him to lose control of the car. "Oh, my God," she said with a gasp. "That's Carl Nagle!"

Veil, who had been focusing on the car's trunk, now shifted his gaze to the driver's head—and saw that Reyna was right. Questions flashed through his mind and were instantly dismissed. It seemed doubtful that Nagle would

be riding around in a stolen police car, yet the flasher—and the police radio he undoubtedly had inside the car—could have been stolen, or purchased, some time before he'd fallen out of favor with all the various powers that had ruled his existence. For the first time Veil saw beneath the thuggish exterior of the man to what had to be a keen, if hopelessly twisted, mind; an outlaw, hunted by both the police and the Mafia, Carl Nagle had managed to wire himself into everything the police did. Veil debated whether or not to tell Reyna that Nagle was on his own, running from everyone, then decided that it would serve no purpose other than to frighten her even more than she already was. Gabriel Vahanian was dead, he thought, and now he was the one looking up the ass of the tiger.

"Lie down on the seat," Veil said calmly, gently squeezing Reyna's knee. "I won't let him hurt you. I promise."

Reyna did as she was told, ducking down and curling into a ball on the seat, but both hands continued to grip Veil's leg.

Nagle suddenly turned hard to the left. Veil stayed with him, narrowly missing a parked car. At the next block Nagle turned right; Veil followed, expertly keeping the car under control as the rear end fishtailed. In the block ahead he could see a milling knot of people and the flashing lights of police cars.

The brake lights on Nagle's car came on as he abruptly pulled over to the curb. Veil reacted instantly, again planting his hand on Reyna's chest and bracing her as he slammed on the brakes. He eased up to prevent the brakes from locking, slammed them on again, and brought the car under control, stopping it at the curb across the street from, and slightly behind, Nagle's car.

Veil immediately ducked down and peered over the dashboard at Nagle; the man was sitting rigidly in his car, radio microphone in his hand, staring down the street. Imprisoned in his own world of desperation and madness, apparently he had never even noticed the car pursuing him.

"Veil . . . ?"

"It's all right. Nagle doesn't know we're here. You stay right where you are."

Reyna's voice was a croaking whisper. "Toby?"

"No sign of him, but a lot of men are pointing toward a building under construction. He must be in there someplace."

"Thank God he's still alive," Reyna said in a small voice. "Are there police?"

"Yes."

"Veil, maybe we should talk to them now. This is getting pretty hairy."

"Hang in there, sweetheart. Remember, if Toby is taken into custody, the odds are overwhelming that he'll die—and his tribe along with him."

"I just don't want him to die now."

"There's still time. Nobody's gone into the building yet, and Nagle's still in his car. I want to see what he's up to."

Veil waited, and after another minute Nagle began speaking into his microphone. Down the street, a uniformed officer leaned into his car, obviously listening to his radio. Nagle released the transmit button on his microphone, waited a few seconds, then pressed it and spoke again. The patrolman suddenly began shouting orders to the other police on the scene as he pointed to his left.

"Veil . . . ?"

"Nagle's working on his own, Reyna. He's feeding phony information to the police down the street now."

Even as Veil spoke, there was a flurry of activity among the group of policemen by the building; they ran to their cars, got in, and drove off. The crowd that had been milling in the street and on the sidewalk gradually began to disperse. One man reached down into a garbage bin and retrieved a shotgun from where he had hurriedly thrown it at the approach of the police. He and six other men walked halfway up the block, then disappeared into a bar.

"Veil . . . ?"

"Shhh. Just stay there."

Almost ten minutes passed. Then the door of the car

across the street opened. Nagle stepped out and began walking casually down the middle of the street, toward the building skeleton. In one hand he carried a powerful flashlight, and in the other what appeared to be an Uzi submachine gun equipped with a custom-made silencer. He stepped up on the sidewalk and vanished through an opening in the fence surrounding the construction site.

"Nagle's gone into the building," Veil continued as he opened the door and got out. "You stay put. Lock the doors."

"Veil?" Reyna cried out as she sat up and reached for him. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to kill the son of a bitch," he replied evenly as he blew Reyna a kiss, then closed the door.

Veil, moving as silently as death, ran down the street and across the intersection to the construction site. He waited, pressed back against the fence next to the opening, listening. When he heard nothing, he darted through the opening, angling across to the opposite side. There he crouched low in the darkness, listening again. This time he heard the faint, shuffling sound of footsteps on wood scaffolding.

Suddenly a bright cone of light from Nagle's flashlight pierced the darkness on the second floor of the steel skeleton. There were more shuffling footsteps, then the clatter of loose boards. Veil thought he heard a faint, low rumble, as if Nagle were talking to himself.

Veil straightened up and moved off to his right. At the corner of the building he reached up and gripped a steel girder, then began to climb up the grid work. Suddenly he heard a can clatter, back near the entrance. He turned his head in time to see the unmistakable figure of Reyna—a master tracker undone and made careless by her terror of the monster that was Carl Nagle—trip and fall through the opening in the fence. A moment later she cried out in pain.

Veil immediately released his grip on the steel and dropped back to the ground. He landed, then sprinted through the rubble-strewn darkness toward where Reyna

lay at the bottom of a wedge of dim light cast by street lamps. Without slowing his pace he ran through the light, reaching down as he did so and grabbing a handful of Reyna's jacket, jerking her off the ground and carrying her to the other side of the opening just as a burst of fire, sounding like nothing so much as a person spitting watermelon seeds at an impossibly fast clip, raked across the fence just above Veil's head. He fell on top of Reyna to shield her with his body, holding her head down with his hand, burying his own head in her thick hair and waiting as the *pfft-pfft* sound of bullets striking wood slowed in tempo—then stopped.

Veil got up on his hands and knees and, pulling Reyna along with him by her belt, scurried forward to the shelter of a wide support girder.

"Shh, shh," Veil intoned to the whimpering Reyna as he held her tight. Her eyes were wide with horror, and her breath came in short, panting gasps. "You have to control it, Reyna. Shh."

Finally Reyna was able to control her sobbing, although she continued to breathe in gasps. "Wh-what in—God's name?"

"It's called a submachine gun, sweetheart," Veil said, peering around the girder and looking up. Nagle's light was out. "Unfortunately, that particular model fires up to three hundred rounds a minute."

"He plans to use that on *Toby*?"

"Obviously, he'll use it on anyone who gets in his way—he'd use a cannon if he had one. There's no time now for details, but Nagle's on the outs with both the cops and the crooks. He's out of his head but not so crazy that he isn't thinking. He needs the heroin in the Nal-toon to finance an escape out of the country. I didn't tell you before because I didn't want you more frightened than you already were. Now—what the *hell* are you doing here?"

Reyna clung to Veil as she shook her head in fear and frustration. "I got to thinking that Nagle had a gun and you didn't."

"I don't need a gun to kill Nagle, Reyna."

"But there's also Toby to consider. I'm not sure you fully appreciate how dangerous he is. The man can almost literally see in the dark; to him you're probably just another enemy. If you passed him in the dark, he might kill you. It was just you against both of them."

"Didn't it occur to you that I'd considered that?" Veil whispered angrily. He swallowed his irritation, took a deep breath. "Thank you, Reyna. I know how you feel about Nagle. Coming in here took a lot of guts."

"I wanted to call out to Toby, explain to him what was happening."

"*Who's there?*" Nagle's voice was right above them.

Veil signaled with his hand for Reyna to crawl along the foundation to the next girder. "Somebody who's going to take that toy away from you, Nagle, and shove it up your ass. Just be patient. I'll be up there in a few minutes."

"*Kendry?!* Is that you, you fucker?"

"Get out of here, Nagle," Veil said in a casual tone, his voice carrying easily in the steel-amplified darkness. "Unless all your brains have run out your ears, you have to know this play is over. Somebody's bound to hear that thing, even with a silencer, and you must have sprayed at least a hundred rounds into the street. Your ex-colleagues on the force are probably on their way back here right now. My advice is to split and try again another day."

He could almost feel Nagle straining to hear in the darkness, and Veil listened with him. There was no wail of police sirens.

Nagle's answer now came—a burst of fire. But the angle was wrong, and the bullets plowed harmlessly into the dirt a few feet from where Veil was standing. Veil moved in a crouch along the foundation to where Reyna was waiting.

"Veil," Reyna whispered urgently, "I have to talk to Toby. He has to understand what's happening."

"You're not going to talk to anyone," Veil whispered back in a firm voice. "Nagle may think it was me who stumbled in through the entrance. We're going to take our time and work our way very carefully around the build-

ing, and then you're going to scoot your cute ass right back out the way you came in."

"No," Reyna answered in a tone filled with quiet determination. "You don't know everything, Veil Kendry. Believe me, you need me to protect you from Toby. We're in this together, and I'm not leaving here without you."

"Reyna—"

Reyna suddenly released Veil, turned, cupped her hands to her mouth, and called out in the clicking language of the K'ung. Her lilting voice rose and fell, eerily beautiful as it echoed back and forth inside the steel shell.

"*That you, Alexander?!*" There was a burst of fire, fifteen yards wide of the mark. "Oh, kid, if you think what I did to you before was something, wait until I get my hands on you this time!"

"What did you say to Toby?" Veil whispered.

"I kind of introduced you, said that you were with me and trying to help him too. I asked him not to harm you and told him that the other man was his enemy and wanted to kill all of us. I asked him to trust us and to try to escape when he had the chance. I told him where we'd parked the car, then asked him to go there and wait for us."

"Do you think he'll do it?"

"No," Reyna answered after a pause. "But I didn't think it would hurt to try."

Suddenly a powerful beam of light cut through the darkness and swept across the fence in front of them. There was a clatter of loose scaffolding, and Veil peered around the edge of the girder to see the light descending a ramp.

Nagle's rumbling voice was stretched taut with madness. "You ain't carrying, Kendry. If you were, you'd have used your piece by now. I'm going to shoot you in half, you fucker, and then I'm going to fuck that girl's brains out—literally. I'm going to kill her with my cock."

Veil put his fingers to his lips to warn Reyna into silence. He motioned for her to lie flat on the ground, then reached down to his boot for his knife. Back against the

steel, Veil again peered around the edge of the girder. Nagle was three quarters of the way down the ramp, flashing his light around the ground floor.

Suddenly there was a thud, then a clatter that sounded like wood against steel.

"What the fuck?!"

Veil watched as Nagle rubbed his forehead, then put his hand into the light. There was blood. He cursed again, then shined the light into the darkness above him. Something that looked like a line of night flashed down through the light, and Nagle cried out in pain as he shined the light on the inside of his right bicep, where a featherless arrow hung loosely from the flesh. He pulled out the arrow and flung it away, then fired a burst of gunfire up into the darkness.

"I'm gonna get you, you black bastard!" he shouted as he started back up the scaffolding.

"Now I'm going to take him," Veil said, starting to step out from behind the girder.

"Wait!" Reyna hissed as she grabbed hold of the back of his jacket.

Veil turned and was startled by the expression on Reyna's face. Her eyes gleamed, and her lips were set in a crooked grin that had no laughter in it. She was trembling all over, but Veil did not think it was from fear. "What's the matter?"

"Nagle isn't going to find Toby," Reyna answered through bloodless lips that barely moved. "I don't want you to go up there."

"I can take care of myself, Reyna. You know that. Nagle has to be killed."

"No," Reyna said, the word punctuated by gunfire from above. Bullets ricocheted off the steel girders, whining in the night and shooting off sparks. "If Nagle kills you, then he'll have me—and I can't describe the horrible things he'll do to me. You promised he'd never hurt me."

"He can't hurt you if he's dead, Reyna. The best way for me to protect you is to kill the bastard."

"No. I'm afraid. Toby will get out of here on his own.

He'll go into the next cemetery and go to ground to rest. I want you to take me out of here, Veil."

"Reyna—"

"You promised, Veil. I'm afraid."

He studied Reyna's face for a few moments, then abruptly took her by the hand and led her back the way they had come. He paused at the edge of the building, listening. Nagle had apparently forgotten all about them, for he was now up on the third floor, cursing and flashing his light around.

Veil pushed Reyna through the opening in the fence, then followed her as she walked quickly, body stiff and hands clenched into fists at her sides, to the car. She got into the car, slamming the door shut behind her.

Veil slid in behind the wheel, turned, and studied Reyna. Her face was still clenched into a grim mask that seemed ready to break at any moment, and Veil felt certain she was on the verge of hysterical laughter.

"Reyna?"

"Mmm. I'm all right."

"The safari's going to take a break for a few hours. You say Toby will rest; we need to rest, and I have to make a couple of phone calls. I'm going to check us into a hotel."

"Mmm."

"Reyna, what's the matter?" Veil asked as he started the engine and pulled away from the curb.

"Nothing," Reyna replied curtly.

Veil was approaching the intersection when Carl Nagle suddenly walked through the opening in the fence. Veil floored the accelerator and yanked the wheel hard to the left. The car shot forward, bumped up over the curb, and shot down the sidewalk only inches from the fence. Nagle glanced around. His mouth dropped open and he half fell, half stumbled back through the opening as Veil sped over the spot where he had been standing only a moment before.

"Win some, lose some," Veil said as he braked, bucked down off the curb, and turned left at the corner.

They drove in silence for a few minutes as Veil headed

toward the business section of Sunnyside. Reyna sat as rigidly as if she had been skewered with a metal rod.

"God forgive me," the woman said in a voice just above a whisper.

Veil reached over and gently stroked the back of her neck. "What was that business back there all about, Reyna?"

Reyna reached over her shoulder, found Veil's hand, and squeezed it. "I knew you could kill Nagle. I'm beginning to think that Archangel—"

"Don't call me that, Reyna—not ever. Don't even repeat the name, except to your friend. You told me you understood."

Reyna released Veil's hand, slowly leaned forward, and rested her head against the dashboard. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "What I meant to say is that I'm beginning to believe that you can do just about anything."

"I certainly could have killed Nagle. Why did you stop me?"

"You really would have killed him, wouldn't you? Even in the dark, with just your knife against that terrible gun."

Veil said nothing.

"Then we would have had Toby trapped inside the building," Reyna continued after a pause. "I could have talked to him and known for sure that he was listening. Then the sun would have risen and we'd have been able to find him. Maybe he would have finally come to us."

"Those thoughts occurred to me," Veil said dryly.

"God forgive me."

"For what, Reyna?"

"You would have killed him."

"Yes."

Now Reyna turned to face Veil. The mask finally broke as tears welled in her eyes and flowed down her cheeks. "May God forgive me, Veil. May you and Toby forgive me if anything happens to the two of you. I didn't want Carl Nagle to die so easily."

Chapter Fourteen

Veil dreams.

He assumed he would be Toby, but he unexpectedly finds himself in the mind, looking through the eyes, of a sixteen-year-old boy. He is wondering if his mother might not be right. What if Toby *is* the Black Messiah? And what if Toby *does* take a special interest in *him*? Usually this thought makes the boy uneasy, but at other times it makes him feel good.

Sometimes, when the boy feels depressed or confused, he tentatively tries speaking to Toby's spirit, asking for the African's help or advice. The boy has often thought about the weeks Toby spent in Central Park and the pain He must have suffered from the bullet wound in His arm.

As a result of his thoughts, the boy has found that he no longer even wants to risk hurting people; he has turned from mugging as a chief source of income to robbing stores, stealing various items and selling them to a fence who lives in his neighborhood.

However, even robbing stores has begun to bother him. The boy has been having nightmares as a result of his

worry that Toby *might* be watching him, judging him—perhaps waiting to kill him, as He killed the two muggers, if the boy does not stop stealing altogether.

The boy's problem is that he does not know any other way to obtain the money he is used to having in his pockets. Now he is broke; he needs money and has decided that he has no choice but to get it the fastest and easiest way he knows—mugging subway riders in Manhattan.

He'd boarded the subway bound for Manhattan but had almost immediately suffered from a shortness of breath and a fluttering heartbeat. He does not want to threaten anyone with a knife; he does not want to put himself into a situation where he might have to hurt—or even kill—someone.

His mother could be right. Toby could be watching him.

He gets off the subway while still in Queens, at a stop on a street running parallel to Mount Olive Cemetery. The boy walks nervously to the north end of the cemetery, then stops when he comes to an intersection where all the streetlights have been shot out by children with air rifles. The intersection is dark, and the store on the corner closest to him is a camera shop. The boy glances quickly around him. Seeing that the street and sidewalks are empty, he walks quickly to the store.

There is an old steel gate drawn across the entrance to the shop and an adjacent display window. The boy knows it will be a simple matter for him to break the window with a rock or his elbow, reach through two broken slats in the gate, and grab two or three of the cameras on display. The fence might give him as much as twenty dollars per camera. It isn't much, the boy thinks, but at least he won't be broke.

The boy searches at the curb until he finds a piece of broken pavement. He walks back to the window, raises the chunk of cement—and stiffens. He slowly lowers his hand as he feels his body break into a sweat.

This is ridiculous, the boy thinks. He has done this sort of thing countless times in the past and has never been caught. Yet he's never been so nervous. What terrifies him

is the thought that a Black Messiah might be around—a Black Messiah Who kills thieves.

To reassure himself that he is not being watched by anyone, much less Toby, the boy walks to the corner and again looks around. The block across the intersection is completely dark, and the boy marks that street as his escape route. To his left, halfway down the block, is a garishly lit bar, but there is no one standing outside on the sidewalk. All of the buildings on the block to his right have been razed to make room for a high rise; the steel skeleton of the building soars from behind a plywood fence into the night sky. He is alone, the boy thinks, absolutely alone.

He walks back to the camera shop, takes a deep breath, then smashes the stone through the window. A shrill alarm bell sounds, but the boy has expected that, and he does not panic. He reaches through the gate, through the broken pane of glass, grabs two Polaroids and a Nikon, then sprints across the intersection toward the night-black street beyond. He leaps up on the sidewalk, sprints twenty yards, then tries to stop with a suddenness that causes him to turn his ankle, stumble, and fall. He hurls the cameras away from him, scrambles to his feet, and stumbles backward until he bumps hard and painfully against the brick facade of the building behind him. His heart pounds wildly inside his chest, and his mouth has gone absolutely dry. He badly wants to scream, to howl his regret and sorrow at the sky, but no sound will come out of his throat. In this terror-filled moment the boy knows beyond any doubt that he is going to die.

Toby stands in the darkness no more than ten feet away from the spot where the boy cowers.

The figure is cloaked in darkness, but there is no doubt in the boy's mind that it is Toby. Toby is naked, slumped against a shop door, breathing hoarsely. Toby holds a ragged bundle in His arms, and from the cloth protrudes the head of a wooden statue.

His mother was right, the boy thinks. The Black Messiah has been watching him; Toby has seen, and now He will kill.

The boy's mouth opens and shuts a few times before he finally finds his voice. "*Sheeeit!*" he screams.

The sound of his own yell galvanizes the boy's muscles. Oblivious to the pain in his twisted ankle, he pushes off the brick wall and dashes out into the street, expecting at any moment to feel a spear tearing into his back, ripping through his heart and lungs.

He makes it down the street to the bar and goes crashing through the door. He runs into a table, spins around, and sprawls on the floor.

"Hey, kid—!"

"He's gonna kill me, man!" The boy sobs, squirming in pain on the floor and clawing at his twisted ankle. "He's gonna kill me!"

A big man with anchor tattoos on both hairy forearms laughs as he slides off his bar stool. He reaches down and hauls the boy to his feet by the shirt collar. "Who's gonna kill you, kid?"

The boy swallows hard, wipes tears from his eyes, and points a trembling finger in the direction of the street. "Toby," he croaks. "The Black Messiah."

The big man's eyes narrow as he shakes the boy. "You've seen the African?"

"Out *there*, man!" the boy says, his head bobbing up and down. "He's right down the street!"

Suddenly the bar is filled with excited shouts, the grating sounds of chairs scraping on the hardwood floor, then the ominous clanking of steel. The boy stares wide-eyed as men rush past him, over him, pushing at each other as they pour out the door. Most of the men carry weapons of some sort, and only now does the boy realize that the bar was filled with a vigilante group on the hunt for Toby. In a few moments he is alone; everyone, including the bartender, has rushed out into the street.

The boy gets to his feet and limps out of the bar in time to see a naked black figure carrying a bundle dart through a gap in the fence surrounding the half-finished building in the next block. The vigilantes have seen Him and are

shouting excitedly, waving their weapons in the air, as they run through the intersection.

By the time the boy reaches the construction site, a dozen men are clustered around the gap in the fence where Toby had disappeared. There is a great deal of shouting and confusion. One man, armed with a hunting rifle, steps through the gap into the darkness beyond, but he reappears after only a minute or two.

"It's dark as shit in there," the man says. "I ain't takin' no chance on gettin' a spear stuck up *my* ass."

The men back up into the middle of the street. One of the men grunts as he points to an area high up on the steel skeleton. He raises his rifle to his shoulder and squeezes off a shot. Another man shouts that he has seen Toby. More shots are fired. Bullets ricochet off the forest of steel girders, and a few of the men duck and run for cover from their own bullets.

Veil rolls away from the dream, but he does not awaken, and he does not enter into deep sleep. Instead he searches for Toby until he finds him and becomes him.

Veil is Toby.

He cannot remember ever feeling so tired or sick. The Nal-toon has set him a very great trial, he thinks, one which is perhaps greater than any K'ung warrior has been asked to endure. He prays that he will have the strength to continue.

But then he reminds himself that if the trial is great, so are the Nal-toon's gifts; food, sweet water, sanctuary in the *Newyorkcities'* jungles of the dead, and—most wondrous treasure of all—the Nal-toon's blood-shilluk. He must have courage.

He lies in a shallow trench he dug at the bottom of a shallow basin, near a stream, in a copse of trees surrounded by brush-covered knolls. He knows that it is not good cover, but he has simply been too exhausted and sick to search for better. He has to rest.

A short time before, he took an unusually large dose of the blood-shilluk, but it does not seem to be having the usual rapid effect; his bowels churn and he is still in great

pain. Indeed he has found that he must continue to take increasingly larger doses of the God-medicine in order to function at all.

He wishes he could think clearly, for the behavior of some of the *Newyorkcities* is increasingly confusing to him. It is difficult for him to imagine any tribe that would not be totally united in their desire to possess the Nal-toon, Who is all.

Yet . . .

There was the young *Newyorkcity* warrior who had surprised him in the dark *street*. The warrior could have attacked him but had run away.

And there was Reyna, and the man-in-night.

Veil is now considering the possibility that it had been Reyna in the last jungle of the dead, not a spirit, and that she was trying to find him in order to give him aid. Perhaps Reyna and the man-in-night have been trying to help him all along. Obviously, Veil thinks, they seem to know where he is going, yet have not told any other *Newyorkcities*.

He remembers vividly how the *Newyorkcities* running after him in the *street* had strengthened his muscles and cleared his mind, enabling him to run and hide in the open *building*.

The problem had been that the *building* was a trap, not sanctuary, and when the huge warrior with the hand-light and big bang-stick had entered, Veil had assumed that this was the *Newyorkcities'* champion, their greatest warrior, sent to duel with him in a battle of honor. In his weakened condition, Veil had known that he had no real chance against this land's most powerful warrior, but he had resolved to fight with courage and die with honor.

From the moment the warrior had entered the *building*, Veil had stalked him from a higher level—and it had come as a shock to Veil to see how poorly the huge man tracked in the darkness; even with his powerful hand-light, his healthy body and two good eyes, it had seemed to Veil that the man could not see or move. With growing excitement at the thought that the Nal-toon might purposely be

weakening this champion, Veil had continued to stalk the man, squinting his good eye in order to focus his vision. He'd known that he would have to be very cautious, for even a good hit with a poisoned arrow would not prevent the man from using his deadly bang-stick.

Then, to Veil's amazement, the man-in-night and Reyna had come into the *building*. And the *Newyorkcity* champion had tried to kill them. Reyna and the man-in-night who traveled with her were willing to risk their lives for him, Veil had thought.

Perhaps. If it was not a trick to put him off-guard.

Veil had stalked the warrior as the warrior stalked Reyna and the man-in-night. He had ignored Reyna's pleas for him to run, for there had been the possibility that she was trying to force him out into the open, where other *Newyorkcities* would be waiting for him.

On the other hand, if it was not a trick, Veil would not abandon the two people who were risking their lives for him. That was not the way of the warrior. If Reyna and the man-in-night were his allies, then he would fight to help them—and he would trust the Nal-toon to see into his heart and watch over a K'ung warrior who was doing what he thought he must.

Then the warrior had started down after Reyna and the man-in-night, and Veil had attacked—first with his throwing stick, and then with a poisoned arrow that had found its mark. Reyna and the man-in-night had escaped.

Veil had watched with some amusement as the big warrior had continued to stumble around in the dark, looking for him. Veil had not been able to understand how a man who was facing death would waste a single heartbeat pursuing another warrior he obviously could not find.

He had waited patiently until he'd been absolutely certain that all the *Newyorkcities* were gone before he'd left the *building*. By then the excitement and activity had begun to take their toll; his stomach had begun to cramp severely, his legs wobbled under him, and he could barely see.

He'd been halfway down the *street* before he'd realized that he was being followed. A chill had gone through him, for in the time that his senses had deserted him, his pursuer could easily have killed him, especially if the *Newyorkcity* had a bang-stick.

Breathing a prayer of thanks to the Nal-toon for making him aware of his pursuer, Veil had hobbled as fast as he could down the *street*, then cried inwardly with joy when he had seen a gap in the stone wall to his right, which led into a jungle. He'd darted into the jungle, then ducked behind a tree and waited.

Veil had been surprised to find that his pursuer was the same young warrior who had confronted, then run away from him earlier. The boy had no weapons, and so Veil had merely put the tip of an arrow against the boy's throat.

"Holy shit!"

"Go away. I do not want to kill you. Just go away."

Although his entire body trembled with terror, the young warrior had stood his ground.

"Man, I can't understand a word you're saying, but I can see that you're hurt. I want to help you, and I promise I won't tell anyone where you are. Come home with me. My mom thinks you're like Jesus, and maybe I do too. She'll fix you up, and then you'll have a good place to hide."

"Go!" Veil had commanded, removing the arrow tip from the boy's throat and pointing toward the *street*. And the boy had run away.

Perhaps he should have killed the boy, Veil thinks—but the boy had not killed him when he'd had the chance. Veil finds everything confusing; life is clean and simple in the desert, and it is usually easy to tell friends from enemies. Not in *Newyorkcity*; this is a place that clouds a warrior's mind and drains his will.

He sniffs a large amount of the Nal-toon's blood-shilluk. Then, impatient with the increasing slowness of the effect, he sniffs still more. Finally, his head spinning, Veil passes out.

• • •

Night-chill awakens Veil-in-Toby. He lies still, listening, trying to probe the darkness with his hunter-warrior's senses in order to evaluate the surrounding area. When he is satisfied that there is no one near, he pushes aside the brush that covers him and sits up. The pain that shoots through his skull almost makes him keel over, and he quickly sniffs some blood-shilluk. It takes a long time for the blood-shilluk to take effect, but Veil waits, unwilling to risk passing out if he takes more. He must move on.

It occurs to him that he should eat, although he has not been hungry for a long time. He has no food but resolves to find the strength to hunt at the earliest opportunity. He drinks at a nearby stream, then moves on to the southeast.

A full moon lights the open ground. Under other circumstances he might not travel so quickly after the incident in the open *building*, but he feels that the Nal-toon now wants him to hurry. No matter how much he rests, Veil thinks, he seems to grow progressively weaker. He must get to the *airplane* fields soon. He is terribly lonely and he wants to go home.

He moves through the trees around the perimeter of a meadow. As he approaches the far end Veil stops and gazes suspiciously at an area where the meadow narrows. The whole jungle is growing smaller, he thinks, narrowing. Although he has been walking in a straight line through trees, he now finds that there is a stone wall close to his right, and beyond that a *street*. He is in danger.

His head pulses with pain, but he resists the impulse to take more blood-shilluk; while the God-medicine at one time cleared his senses and eased his pain, it now tends to confuse and disorient him even further. He is no longer sure of the proper amount to take, and so he decides to try to take none—at least not while he is traveling.

Veil slumps down, braces his back against a tree, and checks his weapons. He has lost his throwing stick, but he still has his bow, six poisoned arrows, and a hastily constructed spear with a sharp stone head, lashed to the

shaft with vines. He considers these adequate replacements for the spear and knife lost in the place of the rolling wooden objects.

He is so very, very tired, Veil thinks—yet he must make a decision. He does not wish to go out into the lighted *street* while there is still cover, but the narrowing of the jungle before him makes him nervous; it is an area where man-snares could be set, or where *Newyorkcities* could be waiting to ambush him.

To go out into the *street* where he can be seen, Veil thinks, or go on into the narrow jungle where he can be trapped?

He knows he must make the decision, and it looms as an unbearable, momentous hurdle. Suddenly he begins to weep.

"Great Nal-toon, please help me," Veil whispers, ashamed of his sobbing but unable any longer to control his depthless sorrow and loneliness. "My will is leaving me, and I do not think I can go on without strength, which You must give me. When will I be judged to have passed Your trial, great Nal-toon? Please have mercy on and forgive me, Nal-toon, for this warrior is finished."

Chapter Fifteen

Veil rose to his feet and glanced around them, while Reyna continued crawling on her hands and knees along a bare patch of ground where there were many footprints. Throughout the day, mourners had cast hostile glances at the man and woman who acted strange and carried a noisy tape recorder. However, it was not annoyed mourners that concerned Veil; once, just before noon, he'd caught the glint of metal where the bright sunlight had shafted down through a gap in a heavily wooded area with no graves. He had the strong feeling that they were being watched, and it did not surprise him. After the incident at the construction site he knew that anyone with a map, ruler, and a modicum of intelligence could at least guess that the K'ung prince was heading southeast, even if his destination was unclear. Veil expected any number of hunters in the field before nightfall.

"Who were you talking with on the phone last night?" Reyna asked without looking up from the ground.

"Victor Raskolnikov and a couple of other friends," Veil

answered absently as he continued to study the surrounding woods and the small field of grave markers, which they were now searching. "One's a doctor, and the other's a pilot and a mercenary. They're going to deliver Toby and the Nal-toon back to the Kalahari. Victor's financing the operation."

"Oh, Veil," Reyna said, glancing up at him. She was crying but with joy. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

Veil shrugged. "We can't take Toby anywhere unless we find him."

"How will they do it?"

"In stages. First he'll be flown over the border into either Canada or Mexico—it hasn't been decided which yet, and that decision rests on a couple of other factors. If the doctor can patch him up, he'll be given false travel documents and put on a plane to Botswana. Otherwise, Walrus—the pilot—will deliver Toby himself. Your missionary friends have already been contacted, and they're taking care of business at the other end."

Reyna got to her feet, walked over to Veil, and hugged him. "Thank you," she said simply.

"Don't thank me yet. We have to get Toby to Flushing Airport. Right now that fifteen miles might as well be fifteen thousand. Have you found anything?"

"Not here. I'm pretty sure he's behind us."

"If you do find spoor, don't react. I think we've got company."

"I know. I saw a couple of them. They're waiting for us to deliver the goods, aren't they?"

"Of course. How did you read them? Cops or crooks?"

"I think crooks."

"Agreed. Cops would handle it differently." Veil held Reyna out at arm's length and smiled. "You're holding up beautifully."

Reyna grinned shyly. "What else is there to do?"

"Nothing. I'm just telling you that you're special."

"Thanks. My biggest concern right now is that Toby will try to circle around through the streets tonight."

"Because he'll see that this is a bottleneck?"

"Yes. And he'll sense the presence of the men—if they're still here tonight."

Veil glanced at his watch. "It will be dark in a couple of hours, so it's time for us to lose our observers. We'll walk back up to the other end of the cemetery, then go out and get something to eat. Keep talking to him. Lay it on the line, Reyna. Make it short and sweet. If he doesn't come to us tonight, it's all over."

• • •

Veil worked quickly in the darkness, stooping and opening the canvas sack he had brought back with him. Inside was a three-hundred-yard length of strong twine to which tiny bells had been attached at twenty-yard intervals. Twine and bells had been stained black.

Both Veil and Reyna had covered their exposed flesh with mud.

Avoiding the patches of bright moonlight that fell through the trees, Veil went to the far edge of the cemetery. He tied one end of the twine around a tree trunk, then worked his way back. Within twenty minutes he had strung the entire width of the bottleneck.

Veil took both of Reyna's hands in his. "Assuming Toby finally decides to do things the easy way, do you think he can find us?"

"I don't know, Veil."

"Well, we can't use the recorder or have you call out anymore, because we don't know who else might be listening. So we'll have to do it the hard way, if necessary. You stay here, and I'll go out along the line about a hundred yards. When and if he does come through here, he should hit that string. He's sick and weak, so I should be able to sit on him before he can stick me with anything."

"Veil, you have to be *so* careful. If he even nicks you with one of those arrows . . ."

"You let me worry about it. And I'm in charge now, so you'll do exactly as I say. No matter what you hear, you stay put. *I'm* the only one who reacts to anything. For one thing, somebody other than Toby might trip the line. I don't want you shot. And speaking of shots, if you hear any

gunfire, you get the hell out of here. There'll be nothing more you can do, and I'll meet you at the car. You understand?"

"Veil, I can't just—"

"You'll do as I say, Reyna. End of discussion."

• • •

Veil knelt beside a tree and stared out over a moonlit expanse of grave markers, listening for the tinkle of bells and thinking of the other men who were undoubtedly close by, also watching and listening. He was going to have to be fast, Veil thought. And lucky.

Suddenly the line shook, and there was the sound of bells. To his left.

"Hey!" a man shouted. "There's some kind of line strung across here!"

Veil sprinted silently through the trees. He had gone fifty yards when a figure lurched out at him from behind a tree, to his right.

"I've got—" the man managed to shout before Veil broke his neck. The revolver in the man's hand went off, shattering the stillness.

"Reyna, it's over!" Veil shouted as he picked up the dead man's gun and shoved it into the waistband of his jeans. "They're all over the place! Get out of here!"

He was answered by a fusillade of bullets that ripped through the leaves and branches around him and thudded into the tree trunks.

"Veil? Are you all right?"

"Be quiet! Get out of here! Run!"

There were more shots. Veil ducked and cursed when he heard Reyna call out what he assumed was a warning in K'ung.

There was an answering cry—a distant, ululating, banshee howl that filled the void of night like a physical presence and seemed to come from all directions at once; it began as a low, quavering moan, then abruptly climbed the scale to a warbling, high-pitched scream broken by clicks.

The strange, chilling cry was repeated once, and in the

deep, prolonged silence that followed, it was as if time had been stopped.

That silence was broken by Reyna's startled scream of terror.

"Don't hurt her!" Veil shouted as he ran toward the sound of Reyna's voice. "I'm coming out!"

"Veil, stay away!"

Guns barked in the darkness, and bullets slapped through the leaves just above Veil's head, but he kept running. He shifted the gun in his waistband back against his spine, then slowed as he approached the open, moonlit area in front of the trees where he had left Reyna. He sucked in a deep breath, then slowly walked out into the cold, pale moonlight. He stepped up on a grave marker and raised his hands in the air.

"Here I am," Veil announced, tensing his stomach muscles in anticipation of a bullet he was certain was about to slam into him. "Don't hurt the woman."

A disembodied voice came from somewhere inside the wooded area. "Right this way, pal."

Veil, keeping his arms raised, stepped down from the grave marker and walked toward the sound of the voice. He sighted Reyna the moment he passed into the trees. She was standing in front of a large oak tree, flanked by two men with guns. The man to her left had the fingers of one hand wrapped in her hair and was holding Reyna's head back at a sharp angle. The second man had his gun pointed at Veil's chest.

"That's it," the short, swarthy man holding Reyna said as Veil came within a few paces of them. Veil stopped. The man turned his head slightly, shouted, "I've got Kendry and the woman! Any sign of the African?"

"No!" a man's voice called back. "Hey, that son of a bitch killed Richie!"

"What do we do with them now?" the swarthy man asked his partner.

"We know the nigger's out there; that had to be him doing the screeching. We gotta go out and get him."

"Maybe he'll come to us if he knows we're going to kill his friends."

"Nah. The guy's a fucking savage. He won't give a shit. We're wasting our time with these two. Let's kill 'em like Nagle said we should do in the first place, then we'll go help the other guys look."

"Right," the swarthy man said perfunctorily, tightening his grip on Reyna's hair as he leveled his gun at Veil's head.

Veil watched the man's finger begin to tighten on the trigger. He was about to dive and roll to the side when a dark, silent shape literally seemed to rise from the night behind the man holding Reyna. There was a strangled scream, and suddenly there was an arrow protruding from the man's neck. The dead man's finger twitched on the trigger, sending a bullet whining past Veil's left ear.

Startled, the second man had jumped, then started to turn around as his partner had screamed. What he saw was a black wraith hurtling through the air toward him. The gunman shrieked and fired wildly as a spear narrowly missed his head. Then the bushman was on him. The man pounded at Toby's shoulders with the butt of his gun. Finally Toby's body went limp, and his fingers slipped from the man's throat as he slumped to the ground and lay still.

There was no time for Veil to pull his gun from his belt, and no way to fire past Reyna if he could. He leapt forward and swung. The gunman, taking aim at Toby, caught Veil's movement out of the corner of his eye and turned just enough to take the full force of the blow over his left ear. Veil's fist smashed into the man's temple, crushing the thin layer of bone and the brain beneath.

Reyna dropped down beside the fallen Toby as Veil grabbed his gun, crouched and turned, ready to fire at any sound or movement.

"Hey!" a voice shouted somewhere out in the night. "What the hell's going on over there?"

Veil knelt down beside the sobbing Reyna and felt for Toby's pulse. "He's alive," Veil said, relieved to feel the faint but steady beat of the bushman's heart, "but barely. The wound on his head looks as if it may be infected, and I wouldn't be surprised if he has a concussion."

"Hey, Jimmy!" the voice called. "You guys still over there?" There was a pause, then a tense, "Okay, I'm going to get some help!"

"Let's go," Veil said, lifting Toby in his arms. "You take the Nal-toon."

"Go where?"

"Straight ahead, through the bottleneck and into the other section. We need a place to hide, and this certainly isn't it."

"I'm going ahead," Reyna said, picking up the Nal-toon and darting away, gliding over the ground like some huge moth in the moonlight.

Cradling Toby high on his chest, Veil trotted at a steady pace and, after a time, emerged from the bottleneck into a field of older graves marked by towering tombstones and an occasional mausoleum.

Suddenly Reyna, out of breath from the exertion of running with the Nal-toon, appeared beside him. "There's an old mausoleum off to the left," she said, panting. "A big one. It's hard to be certain with all the shadow, but it looks as if the seal might be broken and the door slightly open. The problem is that there's a high fence around the whole thing, and it's padlocked."

"Go," Veil said curtly.

For the past few minutes the night had been filled with the sound of sirens as the police, alerted by the gunfire, had converged on the cemetery from all directions. Now, as Veil jogged after Reyna, beams of light began carving the darkness around them, and the static-broken voices of men speaking through walkie-talkies could be heard.

Veil rounded a sculpted angel and found himself before a huge, fenced-in mausoleum. Reyna, shaking with panic, was punching at the ancient, rusted padlock on the gate.

"Get away from there," Veil said evenly as he gently lay Toby down on the ground.

Veil stood with his legs slightly apart before the lock, staring down at it, emptying his mind of all concern about the strength of the metal and the approaching police. He waited until he felt power manifest itself as a small, warm

ball just behind his navel, then abruptly raised his right arm and chopped with the heel of his palm against the upper part of the lock. Nothing happened. Calmly, ignoring the walkie-talkie voices that now seemed to be all around them, Veil relaxed his muscles, then squared off again. He waited for his power to focus, then snapped his hand at the lock again. The lock snapped apart.

Reyna removed the lock and pushed the gate open. Veil lifted Toby in his arms, stepped into the mausoleum courtyard, turned, and waited. Reyna stepped through with the Nal-toon, then closed the gate behind her, wincing as it squeaked on its rusty hinges. She reached through the bars, put the lock back in place, and squeezed it shut. Rust and friction held it in place.

"You go ahead!" Reyna whispered urgently, placing the Nal-toon on top of Toby's still body. "I have to clean up behind us!"

Veil crossed the courtyard and squeezed through the narrow opening where the door was ajar and into the utter darkness of the crypt. He eased Toby and the Nal-toon to the floor, then turned and watched as Reyna, crabbing backward on her hands and knees, attempted to erase the evidence of their passage. Her hands flew as she straightened the tall grass and clumps of weeds that had been bent or crushed. She made it to the crypt and slipped through the opening just as two uniformed policemen appeared from behind the stone angel.

Veil and Reyna huddled together as one of the policemen tested the gate. There was the grating squeal of metal—but the lock stayed in place. The policemen moved on.

Veil and Reyna moved back and sat down on the dirt floor of the moldering crypt. Despite the fact that they were touching, they could not see each other. Except for the bar of moonlight at the opening, the heavy, dank darkness was total. Things scuttled around them on the floor. They sat without speaking, listening to Toby's rattling, hoarse breathing as they waited for the dawn.

Chapter Sixteen

Veil rested on his haunches, back braced against the rough, clammy stone of the crypt, staring out through the narrow gap at the entrance. He felt Reyna come up behind him, grunted with pleasure when she put her hands on his shoulders and began to knead the thick, stiff muscles around his neck and collarbone.

"How's Toby?" Veil asked quietly.

Reyna sighed as she rested her head on Veil's back. "He's conscious, but he's burning up with fever. The wound on his head looks terrible. It's very swollen, and there's a lot of pus."

Veil straightened up and went to the rear of the mausoleum where, two hours earlier, they had built a small fire to see by and to ease Toby's racking chills. Cracks in the stone provided some ventilation, and Reyna had carefully selected the wood to be burned, but there was still enough smoke to make Veil's eyes tear. Toby did not seem to mind. The warrior-prince sat propped up against the fungus-covered burial vault. His one good eye

glowed like a cat's in the firelight as he stared back at Veil. Veil smiled, but Toby's face remained impassive.

"I'm looking at one tough man," Veil said thoughtfully. "I can't believe he got this far, much less had the will, strength, and guts to attack those two men. Please tell him for me that he is the finest warrior I have ever met, and I honor him."

Reyna translated Veil's remarks, but Toby remained silent. He took a large pinch of the heroin that had dribbled from the base of the Nal-toon, sniffed it. His eyelids fluttered.

"From the way he's been snorting that stuff," Veil continued, "I'd say he's on his way to becoming a full-blown addict."

"It's all right," Reyna replied in a firm voice. "It's a miracle that a substance which destroys countless lives helped to save Toby's. It kept him going. God provided it for him. When the time comes that Toby no longer needs it, God will take away the craving." She paused, bowed her head. "Damn, I could hang myself for losing that radio. Now we don't know what's happening or who could be out in the cemetery looking for us. Toby needs medicine and bandages, and we *all* need food and water."

"We can't move yet, Reyna. You'd better believe that the bad guys are still out there someplace." As well as Carl Nagle, Veil thought, but he didn't say so. "What were you two talking about before?"

Reyna shrugged her frail shoulders. "Nothing important. I was just trying to ease Toby's pain with talk—and reassure him. If and when we do get some medicine for Toby, I'm afraid that it may be a job to get him to take it. He thinks the heroin is the only medicine he needs."

"Well, that's understandable. It's all he's had to hold him up so far."

"Also, he still isn't sure he trusts us." She paused, smiled thinly. "When I picked him up at the airport, I told him we were in New York City. All this while he's been thinking that we're all one tribe called 'Newyorkcities.' Betrayal of

the tribe is not something a K'ung can easily understand. Good grief."

Veil studied Toby, the filthy, festering wound on the bushman's face, and made a decision. "I know something about thirst," he said in a flat voice, "and this man is suffering. I'm going out to get some things. We can't wait until night. Without water, Toby may not last through the day."

"No!" Reyna cried as she grabbed at Veil's sleeve. Toby started at Reyna's sharp tone, but Reyna turned and spoke reassuringly to him. Toby eased himself back against the vault, and Reyna again spoke to Veil. "You can't go. What if something happens to you?"

"Nothing's going to happen to me."

Reyna emphatically shook her head. "Although I sometimes wonder, you are not Superman. You could be killed, or arrested by the police. Without you Toby is lost. I can't carry him, and I don't know what plans you've made. It won't make any difference if I'm caught. Besides, I move as well as you do—and there's a good deal less of me to spot."

"No," Veil said curtly. "I don't want to frighten you, but I also shouldn't have to remind you that Carl Nagle could be out there somewhere."

Reyna paled at the mention of the man's name, but her mouth remained set in a determined line. She raised her chin slightly. "Toby does need water to make it through the day, Veil. I'm going to get it, and you can't stop me." She turned to speak to Toby, but the bushman had lapsed into unconsciousness.

"Here," Veil said resignedly, handing Reyna a slip of paper. "If you can get to a phone, call this number. Either Victor Raskolnikov or a man named Walrus will be at the other end. It's a secure line, so you can talk freely. Both men know who you are. Let them know what's happening."

Reyna nodded as she put the paper into a pocket in her jeans. She kissed Veil quickly, then slipped out into the day.

• • •

Reyna had been gone almost an hour and a half. Veil was debating whether or not to go look for her when she suddenly appeared at the entrance. She was carrying two large bags of groceries.

"Hey, am I glad to see you!" Veil said as he took Reyna in his arms.

"Take it easy, Veil!" Reyna replied with a grin, her eyes gleaming. Relief at returning safely had made her euphoric. "You're squashing the sandwiches!"

"Anybody see you?"

"Are you kidding? Spot the chief tracker? No way." Reyna's smile slowly faded. "There are still men out there, though, and they're not cops."

"Were you able to talk to Victor or Walrus?"

"Walrus." Reyna paused, smiled. "He's a funny man."

"Mmm. His friends think so."

"I told him that we had Toby and that we were going to lie low for a while here."

"Is everything ready in Flushing?"

"Yes. He said to tell you that everything's in place and he's ready to go when you are. He gave me another number, and we're to call him as soon as we get out of here."

"Good." Veil took the bags from Reyna, set them on the floor, then took Reyna in his arms again and kissed her hard.

"I'm afraid I spent all the money you gave me, Veil," Reyna said when he had released her. "Do we have anything left?"

"Just change for phone calls," Veil replied as he began to empty the bags Reyna had brought. He set antiseptic, bandages, and bottled water off to one side. "But money's the least of our worries right now. Damn, you're lucky you didn't break your back carrying all this stuff. You are one hell of a lot stronger than you look."

"You and Toby give me strength, Veil," Reyna said seriously.

"No. The strength is all yours."

"Oh! You'll find a *New York Times* and *Daily News* at the bottom of one of those bags. Just in case you want to keep track of our press notices."

"Outstanding," Veil said as he took the newspapers from the bag and began scanning the leads.

Reyna went to Toby, spoke to him softly and at length before opening a bottle of water and giving it to him. He drank it without hurrying and gave no indication that he wanted more. She gave him three pears, which he wolfed down while Reyna used water from a second bottle to begin washing his face wound.

Veil finished with the papers, then went to help Reyna medicate and bandage Toby's wound. The K'ung warrior sat stoically, sucking on an orange, as the man and woman worked on him. The only sign of his discomfort was an occasional flickering of an eyelid. He finally agreed to swallow four aspirin, after what seemed to Veil a long and torturous debate. But he also sniffed a large amount of heroin.

"There were three other reported sightings of Toby last night," Veil said as he gently rubbed antiseptic salve over Toby's eye and the side of his face. "All in different sections of Queens. The police must be getting tired of it, which could explain why they aren't roaming all over the cemetery right now."

"But the police *must* know he's here," Reyna insisted. "What about the bodies of the men who were killed?"

"The police claim it was gang warfare."

"In a cemetery, in the middle of the night? Do you think they really believe it?"

"No," Veil replied after a pause. "The arrow through the one man's throat is a giveaway, but it's not even mentioned in the stories. The police may not want to create a panic in the neighborhood, or they don't want a mob tearing up the cemetery, which is exactly what would happen if the police told all they knew or suspected. You're right—they have to know we're here. They'll be waiting and watching."

"How did the men who attacked us last night know where to look for us?"

"Nagle. They were his men—probably street thugs too low on the totem pole to know he's a marked man."

Reyna's hands began to tremble as she finished bandaging Toby's head. "Besides us, he's the only one who knew for certain that Toby was in the building. He looked at a map and made the right guesses. He knows, doesn't he?"

"I think so."

"You know so," Reyna said in a hollow voice. "We're trapped."

"We'll see," Veil said evenly. "Nobody—cops or crooks—can be certain that we didn't get out of here last night. In any case, it would take an army to guard the entire perimeter of this cemetery. There'll be cracks, and we'll get through. Let's not waste mental energy worrying about anything until we see what it is we have to worry about. Is the car where we left it?"

"Yes, but it looks to me like somebody's watching it."

"Shit," Veil said without emotion. "It figures, though. Nagel saw it. It means we're going to need other transportation."

"Lord, Veil, won't anything go right for us?"

Veil raised his eyebrows slightly. "Toby's still alive, isn't he? And we're all together. Doesn't Wesley Missionary College teach you people about mustard seeds?"

"*Touché,*" Reyna answered with a wry grin. "You're right, of course. Can Walrus or Mr. Raskolnikov pick us up somewhere?"

"Using Victor is a possibility; Walrus has to stay where he is. The problem is that I'd also like to keep Victor where he is, right up to the point where I'm certain I don't need him by a telephone any longer." He paused, absently began to peel an orange. "Let me think about it."

• • •

"I need the heroin in the Nal-toon."

Reyna, who had been sitting next to Toby and cradling the K'ung in her arms, glanced up at the spot where Veil

had been standing in silence for more than an hour while night fell. She could not see him. "Why, Veil?"

"Talk to Toby."

"I don't think he'll give it to you, Veil," Reyna said guardedly.

"He has to, Reyna. It's our ticket out of here, if there is one. I can't use Walrus, Victor, or John—the doctor. I need them where they are."

"But how—"

"Talk to him, Reyna. Tell him he has to give it to me if he wants to get home."

Reyna sighed, then hugged Toby even closer to her. "Toby?" Reyna said in K'ung. "We have to talk about something important."

Toby answered with a grunt.

"We need the Nal-toon's blood-shilluk."

Toby abruptly drew away from Reyna, then hugged the Nal-toon close to his body. "I don't understand," he said thickly. "The blood of the Nal-toon is mine; it is a gift to me from God. It is very powerful medicine."

"The Nal-toon provided you with blood when you needed it for pain," Reyna said after a long, thoughtful pause. "Now it is needed to help us escape the warriors who are hunting us. It is needed because the Nal-toon wishes to return with you to your people. For that to happen, we need the blood."

"Why?"

"Veil will tell us. He has a plan. He is our chief, and we must do as he says."

"No!" Toby cried, wrapping both arms around the Nal-toon. "My father is chief, not this man!"

Suddenly, close by, church bells began to peal; their sound, clanging and insistent, vibrated in the air.

Reyna could think of no reason why church bells would be rung after sundown. "They toll for thee," she whispered in K'ung.

"What?"

"Nothing, Toby."

"The voice of the Nal-toon speaks differently here."

Reyna felt a chill run through her, and she sat up straighter. "Yes," she said carefully. "What you say is true—the Nal-toon does speak differently here." She paused, took a deep breath. "Tonight, Toby, the Nal-toon's voice is for you alone. It means that you must decide what your god is saying. I tell you that I will never betray you. I tell you that I will die before I will allow you to be captured and the Nal-toon taken away. I also speak for Veil. You must trust Veil, as you must trust me. We want to take you home. Veil has said that he needs the blood-shilluk in order to accomplish this, but it is you who must listen to your heart, and the voice of the Nal-toon, and decide whether or not he is telling the truth and can be trusted."

Toby sat very still for a long time, staring vacantly at a point somewhere above Reyna's head. Finally Toby held the Nal-toon out to the woman. His hands were steady. Reyna bowed her head to Toby, then reverently handed the Nal-toon to Veil, who had stepped into the small circle of light cast by the fire's burning embers.

Veil set the idol down, knelt, bowed to the idol and then to Toby. "Tell him I have to crack open the bottom," he said quietly. "Only the bottom. I won't damage anything else."

"He's given up his god to you, Veil. It means you can do with it what you want."

"I want his permission."

"Toby," Reyna said in K'ung, "Veil and the Nal-toon wish to honor you by asking for your personal permission to open the base so as to remove all of the blood-shilluk. It must be done."

Toby nodded slightly in Veil's direction. "The Nal-toon has spoken to my heart and told me to trust this man."

"It's all right, Veil."

Veil sat down next to Toby on the floor of the crypt. He braced the Nal-toon across his knees with his left hand, then placed the fingers of his right against the false plywood bottom and began to apply steady pressure. The cracked wood squeaked. Veil stopped and glanced at Toby, but the bushman was staring straight ahead, his face

impassive. Veil applied sudden, intense pressure, and the plywood cracked apart. Toby shuddered slightly, but otherwise did not react.

Veil quickly pulled the jagged pieces of plywood from around the base, then reached inside the hollowed-out idol. He pulled out three plastic bags, each one slightly larger than his fist. Two of the bags were intact, but the heroin in the third was trickling from a small gash in the plastic, caused by a plywood splinter. Veil pinched the bag closed, then set it down on the floor next to the others. "There it is," he said quietly. "That's what all the shooting is about."

Reyna whistled softly. "Pure white heroin. There must be enough junk there to supply all the city's addicts for a year."

"Does it bother you, Reyna?"

"No," Reyna answered evenly. "There's no craving. All that happened to me . . . it's like it happened to another person, in another lifetime."

Veil took out his handkerchief and poured some of the heroin from the broken bag into it. "You'd better save this for Toby," he said, holding the handkerchief out to Reyna. "He'll need it."

Reyna studied Toby's face for a few moments, finally shook her head. "No," she said. "He won't need it."

"He's in a lot of pain, Reyna, and we may have to move fast. He's an addict now, and he'll start suffering from withdrawal symptoms if he doesn't get it. This doesn't seem like the time to expect him to kick the habit cold turkey."

Reyna turned to Toby, spoke in K'ung. "Veil has said that you are a great warrior—but he does not yet fully understand how great. He thinks that you still need the Nal-toon's blood-shilluk, but I know you do not. You are with us now, and you no longer have need of the blood-shilluk. Your pain and sickness will still be great, but now the Nal-toon asks you to bear the pain without the great gift. Can you do this?"

"Why do you insult me?" Toby replied, looking away.

"He'll do without the heroin, Veil."

"Reyna—"

"He'll do without it," Reyna repeated in a firm voice. "He has to get off it sometime, so he may as well start now. Besides, I assume you don't want him spaced-out."

"I don't want him in pain," Veil said, folding the handkerchief and placing it next to the plastic bags.

"He'll be all right, Veil. What happens now?"

"First I want to say something," Veil said, reaching out and squeezing Reyna's hand. "You put up a good front, but I know what it cost you to go out there alone. Carl Nagle's out there someplace waiting for us—and you know it. I just want to say that I think you're one hell of a woman."

Reyna smiled. "Why, thank you, sir."

"I have to leave for a little while. I will be careful. I'll be back, and I'll try not to take too long."

"All right," Reyna answered in a small voice.

"Just in case, you have the telephone numbers for—"

"I don't want to know about any 'just in case,' Veil. You make sure you come back."

Veil picked up the broken plastic bag and put it in his jacket pocket. "See you later," he said, and slipped out into the night.

Chapter Seventeen

"Hey, you."

Veil watched as the man started, then quickly turned and nervously peered into the darkness.

"That's right, you!"

This time the man drew a gun from a shoulder holster and pointed it over the stone wall separating the sidewalk from the cemetery. "Who's there?!"

"Just stand still and listen," Veil said softly. "Do what I say, and you could end up with more money than you'll know how to spend."

The man grunted angrily, put one hand on top of the stone wall, and vaulted over it into the darkness beyond. He landed on an incline and cursed as he fell. However, he was a lithe, agile man and was almost immediately up on his feet, running toward the spot from where he thought the voice had come. There was no one there. He searched the surrounding area as best he could in the moonlight but still found no one. He listened, gun held ready, but could hear only the sound of his own, slightly nasal breathing.

"Okay," the man said through clenched teeth as he slowly turned. "I'm listening."

Veil let the man wait. Ten minutes went by before the man cursed under his breath, turned, and walked back the way he had come. He was back at his post on the sidewalk when Veil spoke again.

"Hey, you, dummy. You almost blew it, pal. I picked you because you looked fairly bright. It just goes to show that looks can be deceiving. I want you to stand still and listen. A few minutes of your time could be worth millions to you. If you're not interested, I'll go talk to somebody with more brains. I know there are at least a half dozen of you guys hanging around."

"I'm listening. What's this about millions?"

"What's your name?"

"Sloane," the man said after some hesitation.

"All right, Sloane—"

"You Kendry?"

"First go up the block and tell your buddy that you have to take a crap or something. You have to come with me for a few minutes, and everything will be explained to you. If you try to tip off your buddy—if anyone tries to follow us in—you've blown it. Just keep thinking of what you could do with a few million dollars."

"Okay," Sloane mumbled. "Don't go away."

"Just remember to do exactly as I said."

As Sloane walked away, Veil moved silently through the trees and underbrush on a parallel course. He listened to the exchange between the two gunmen, then moved back with Sloane.

"I did it," Sloane said to the darkness beyond the wall. "What now?"

"Throw your gun over the wall."

"Hey, now, hold on a second!"

"You don't want to do it, don't. I'm gone."

"Okay!"

"Keep your voice down. And move slowly. You're going to be a rich man if you keep your cool, Sloane, but you'd

better make up your mind. You told your buddy you'd be back in ten minutes."

Sloane withdrew his gun from its holster, tossed it over the wall.

"Now you come over. Easy does it. Move off to your left."

Sloane did as he was told. He'd gone about fifteen yards into the cemetery when Veil suddenly appeared in front of him. Sloane stopped walking and stared at the muzzle of his own gun, which was pointing at his chest.

"You are Veil Kendry, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Nagle talks a lot about you," Sloane said with a crooked smile. "I'm waiting to hear what you have to say, Kendry."

"Don't be impatient. Keep moving to your left, but stay inside the trees. Watch how you walk. You attract any attention with those big feet of yours, and I disappear."

• • •

Sloane squinted in the smoky air and grunted. In the dim, flickering light of the small fire he could just make out the objects of Nagle's hunt. The woman and the African. The idol.

"Here, catch," Veil said as he perfunctorily tossed the torn plastic bag at Sloane. Startled, the man juggled the bag in the semidarkness. White powder floated in the air, then slowly drifted down to the ground. "That's pure heroin. Check it out for yourself."

Sloane's hand trembled as he put a thumb and forefinger through the tear in the plastic, pinched some powder, tasted it. "Jesus H. Christ," he murmured. "I can't believe you're throwing this shit around."

"Good stuff?"

"Good?" Sloane wore a slightly dazed expression on his face. "What's left in this bag is worth a fortune. I'd heard rumors that this guy was carrying around something big . . ."

"I assume you'd know how to get rid of it?" Veil asked wryly.

Sloane had begun to sweat. His eyes were teary from the smoke and he rubbed them. "A little bit at a time, over the years," he said in a dry, cracking voice. "Maybe. It's suicide to cross the big guys on something like this."

"So? Like you said, you can spend the rest of your life selling it off in small bits. It sounds to me like a great way to beat inflation. On the other hand, they tell me that money is power. With the money you could get from the sale of that heroin, you might grow pretty big yourself."

The man could not take his eyes off the bag in his hand. "If they caught me, they'd take me apart with a chain saw," he said distantly.

"Getting big money means taking big risks, Sloane. You can always turn us in and collect a few thousand from your boss, can't you? You'll sleep better—but you'll also be making peanuts for the rest of your life while those 'big guys' jerk you around. Sooner or later small potatoes like you end up in jail, anyway. When you get canned for some penny-ante crime, you'll have plenty of opportunity to think about this opportunity you pissed away."

Sloane finally looked up from the bag. His eyes were round and bright in the firelight. "What am I supposed to do for this?"

"You've already earned what you're holding in your hand; you can walk out of here with it. Think of it as a down payment. There are two more bags like that one—bigger, because they're not torn. That bag's been dribbling for days."

"Jesus."

"Do as I ask and they're both yours."

Sloane's eyes went back to the bag in his hand, then to the fine powder strewn on the ground around the glowing embers of the fire. "What do you want me to do?" he asked hoarsely.

"What time do you get off?"

"I was supposed to be relieved an hour and a half ago."

"Then somebody may be there when you get back, so you'd better come up with a good story. First, we need a car. *Rent* one, don't steal it. Leave the car parked at the curb, on this side of the street, at the place where I spoke

to you—or as close as you can without being spotted. Bring the keys and the rental slip to me, here."

Sloane glanced at Toby, who had been partially hidden in shadow. The fire suddenly flared, and the gunman could see the K'ung's bandaged head. Toby's good eye, glowing red and yellow in the firelight, stared balefully back at Sloane, who shuddered.

"Where are you going?" Sloane asked, still transfixed by Toby's unrelenting gaze.

"That's not your concern."

Sloane hefted the bag in his hand. "Dropping off a rented car doesn't seem like much to do for the fortune you're offering me," he said carefully.

"I knew you were bright. There's more—and this is the exciting part. I don't want anyone to see the car, but I do want you to be seen. You find someone you know on watch, go up to him. Tell him you're all worked up and can't sleep. Say you want to hang around because you don't want to miss anything if it happens. Say whatever you please, but be sure you make it sound convincing."

The man shook his head. "That's going to be tough to pull off."

"Ah, but think of all the money you're going to get for a single performance," Veil said evenly. "After you've set that business up, you bring me the keys and the rental slip. You wander off maybe a half mile up the cemetery, then you start yelling and shooting. You've seen us. You keep it up until you've got everyone running to you. That will give us time to get to the car."

"What am I supposed to say when they see you're not there?"

"Use your imagination," Veil said coldly. "That's what you're getting paid for. Just tell them we ran up the cemetery."

Sloane thought about it for a few moments, then nodded. His hands were shaking. "I'll do it. How will I get the rest of the heroin?"

"I'll be carrying it with me when we leave. I'll leave the bags behind the wall at the precise place where you jumped over. When I'm certain you've done your job, I

drop the bags. That's it. After we're gone, you can pick up the heroin anytime you like."

"How do I know there are two other bags?" Sloane asked suspiciously.

Veil took two steps to his left, reached down into the darkness, held up the bags.

"How do I know you'll leave them like you say?"

"You don't, but that bag you're holding in your hand should buy us a little good faith. You were happy with the one; I didn't even have to tell you about the other two. We have no use for the heroin, so there's no reason why we shouldn't leave it—assuming you do your job. On the other hand, we have to trust *you* completely, and you might well decide that a bag in the hand is worth two behind the wall. Ours is the greater risk."

"All right," Sloane said sullenly.

"Remember this, Sloan: If you try crossing us, I'll make sure you never keep the bag you've got. You'll be killed. The point is that we have to trust each other if all of us are going to get what we want. It's a straight deal. You set it up so that we can get away, and you become an instant millionaire; try to screw us, and there's no way you can get away with it."

"I said I'd do it."

Veil glanced at his watch. "I'll see you back here in a couple of hours."

"I don't know if I can find a car-rental place open at this time of night."

"If you can't, it will be the most expensive car you never rented."

"You have to give me back my gun. I need it in case someone decides to check."

Veil took out his own gun and covered Sloane while he handed over the other man's revolver. Sloane slipped it back into his shoulder holster.

"Where's Nagle keeping himself?"

"I don't know," the gunman replied. "I've talked to him a couple of times on the phone, but I haven't seen him. One of the other guys said he thought he saw him cruising

around in a car, but he couldn't be sure. Hell, we're all working with no money up front."

"Then you're lucky I found you, aren't you?"

"I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Just keep thinking of those other two bags of heroin, Sloane."

The gunman carefully placed the bag of heroin in the pocket of his jacket, then slipped out of the crypt. Reyna followed him, replacing the lock on the gate and again straightening out the grass as she retreated.

• • •

Veil heard Reyna's low whistle from the far end of the field of tombstones. It meant that Sloane was on his way back. Alone.

Veil was standing just inside a dense stand of fir trees, fifty yards west of the mausoleum. Toby, the Nal-toon wrapped in his arms, lay unconscious at Veil's feet.

Sloane came into view in the moonlight, walking quickly along the line of trees, heading toward the mausoleum. Reyna suddenly appeared from the shadows, stuck the gun Veil had given her into Sloane's ribs, then grabbed his arm and pulled him into the trees. A minute later they both emerged from the darkness of the fir stand.

"Here are the keys," Sloane said nervously as he handed Veil a plastic key ring and a yellow rental slip. The night was cool, but the man's face glistened with sweat. "It's a new white Pontiac, and it's parked at the curb right where you told me."

"You look jumpy," Veil said evenly. "Relax. Remember that the show's only half over. You have to go up the cemetery and make a lot of noise."

Sloane blinked slowly, and his lips drew back to reveal broken, yellow teeth. "I need to have another bag before I do that."

"No. That wasn't the agreement. With two bags you might feel that you're far enough ahead of the game to walk away. Do your job and you'll get the bags. They'll be where I said they'd be."

"You got them with you?"

"They're in a safe place. When I hear you start shooting and yelling, I'll get them and take them to the wall."

"You'll get them now, Kendry!" Carl Nagle's voice, strangely hollow and tortured, washed over them like acid from the deep well of night.

"Holy Mother of God," Sloane croaked as he clawed frantically for the gun in his shoulder holster.

The explosive chatter of the submachine gun was deafening as the individual rounds blended into one jagged torrent of sound that reverberated off the massive tombstones and echoed in the darkness. Sloane's body was blown backward against a tree and momentarily pinned there by bullets; it jerked like a broken puppet, spouting blood from a dozen different places.

Then the firing stopped, leaving only faint echoes as a counterpoint to the rasping sound of Sloane's pulped corpse sliding down the tree trunk to the ground.

Carl Nagle walked unsteadily out from the trees, and suddenly the air was filled with the putrid, gagging odor of rotting flesh. As the huge man moved into the moonlight, Veil and Reyna could see that he held the Uzi braced in the crook of his left arm. There was thick, caked spittle on his cracked lips, and his eyes gleamed like lumps of banked coals in the puffed, waxy flesh of his face.

Nagle's right arm had ballooned out of the sling that supported it; it jutted grotesquely from his body, like a deformed, rotting gourd that had somehow taken root in his shoulder. Suppurating, swollen to almost twice its normal size, the flesh of the arm was a flaking, blackish green. Streaks of crimson radiated from the bicep to the hand, and up through the neck.

"Gas gangrene," Reyna murmured in horror.

Nagle's eyes had turned mud-black with fever and madness. He chuckled insanely as he leaned back, aimed the muzzle of the gun just over their heads, and fired off a burst into the trees. Leaves and broken branches rained down on Reyna and Veil, who had taken the woman in his arms and was trying to shield her with his body.

"The Lord is my shepherd," Reyna prayed. "I shall not want . . ."

Reyna flowed out of Veil's arms, crumpling to the ground. There were confused shouts all around them as men tried to determine from which direction the shooting had come. Pistol shots cracked as men stumbled in the darkness, firing at shadows and each other. Sirens wailed.

". . . He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He restoreth my soul . . ."

"Listen to me, Nagle," Veil said carefully, his eyes fixed on the ribbed, black muzzle of the submachine gun pointed at his chest. "The cops are going to be here any minute."

Nagle's laughter was high-pitched and chilling. "I *am* the cops!" he howled. "I'm already here!"

Veil tensed slightly, but did not move. Nagle was six feet away, and Veil knew that it would take only a twitch of the man's finger to cut him in half.

". . . He prepareth a table before me . . ."

Nagle coughed hard, then glanced over at Sloane's bloody corpse. "Stupid shit," he mumbled, his words blurred by pain and insanity. "You're all stupid shits. Didn't you think this idiot would be *missed*? I've had men watching the cemetery, but I've been watching them. Sloane was so nervous when he came out of here that I thought he was going to have a heart attack. Then he brings back a rented car. Stupid shit."

"You're a dead man, Nagle," Veil said quietly. "You know it. This may be your last chance to do something decent. Stop the killing. If you believe you have a soul, take this opportunity to save it."

"Fuck my soul," Nagle slurred, spittle dribbling from the corners of his mouth. "I'm gonna be all right, Kendry. You can't kill Carl Nagle with a lousy toy arrow. Where's the rest of the heroin?"

"I'll give it to you if you put the gun down."

". . . Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . ."

The muzzle of the gun swung down toward Reyna, held steady. "You give it to me *now*, Kendry, or I make the girl a few ounces heavier."

". . . Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me . . ."

"Don't do it, Nagle!"

Nagle's eyes and the gun barrel swung back toward Veil, and Reyna suddenly sprang to her feet. Shrieking, she leapt at Nagle, startling the man and causing the burst of fire from his gun to miss Veil. Then Reyna was on him, using both hands to pummel and claw at his gangrenous arm. Blood and pus spurted from the swollen, drumhead-tight flesh. Nagle's mouth dropped open, and he uttered a guttural, soaring, animal howl; the gun dropped to the ground, and he slowly toppled backward, his left arm groping in the air as if searching for some invisible rope that would hold him up. He ended up on his back, still howling and clawing at the air, as Reyna, screaming with mindless rage, methodically kicked at the rotting arm, bursting and shredding the putrefied flesh from the bone.

With her screams wed to Nagle's in a horrible duet of insane rage and death, Reyna wheeled and picked up the submachine gun. She pointed the muzzle at Nagle's head and pulled the trigger. The gun chattered and kicked wildly, but Reyna kept her finger pressed on the trigger until the clip was empty and Nagle's head had been transformed into a pulpy mass that was spread over the ground, glistening in the moonlight.

Veil tore the gun from Reyna's hands and threw it into the woods. "He's dead, Reyna!" he shouted, grabbing Reyna's arms and shaking her. "It's over! Stop it!"

Reyna's mindless screeching gradually died down to a drawn-out moan. Her shoulders sagged, and she slumped against Veil's chest as a helicopter swooped overhead, bathing the field of tombstones in a white light that glittered off specks of marble and polished granite in the stone. The panicked gunfire in the night had stopped, but there were thrashing sounds all around them.

"I'd say it's just about time to move on, lady," Veil said quietly.

"Oh, Veil, how can we?" Reyna sighed, her voice barely audible. "It's finished, but at least we tried the best we could."

"It's not over till the fat lady sings, Reyna. Do you hear her?"

Reyna stepped back and looked at Veil. Slowly her face broke into a crooked grin. "She may not be singing yet, but I surely do hear her clearing her throat."

"Let's go," Veil said, lifting Toby in his arms. "You take the lead."

Reyna picked up the Nal-toon. "Straight down the cemetery?"

"It's too late to make it back to the mausoleum, so that seems as good a direction as any."

With Reyna leading the way, Veil trotted through the stand of fir trees. Men moved in the darkness around them. Suddenly Reyna stopped, turned back, and frantically waved at him before diving into some underbrush. Veil stepped behind a tree just as two uniformed policemen, shining powerful flashlights, emerged from the trees to his right and walked over the spot where he had been. Their walkie-talkies crackled in the darkness.

Veil hurried forward until he came abreast of Reyna. Both stepped behind another large tree as a portly policeman, red-faced and gasping for breath, ran past with his gun drawn. Reyna darted ahead, and Veil followed.

Then they reached the end of the cemetery.

Reyna, running a few paces ahead, abruptly stopped and stifled a cry. "Oh, no," she moaned as Veil came up beside her.

Before them was the rolling, manicured expanse of a golf course on which scores of heavily armed police trotted forward like a phalanx of Roman legionnaires; flashlights bobbed up and down, boring holes in the night. There was no place left to run.

Veil caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned, saw Reyna place the Nal-toon on the ground. She pulled her T-shirt over her head, then slipped out of her jeans, underpants, and sneakers.

"Put the sneakers on Toby," Reyna said breathlessly as she scooped up a handful of the loamy soil and began to darken her body. "Your jacket is big enough to cover the rest of him."

Veil watched as Reyna wrapped her clothes around the Nal-toon and clutched the idol to her breast. "Reyna, you can't—"

"Oh, yes I can! *Go,* Veil! I'll get the cops off your back. Just keep going! I'll find you!"

"Reyna!"

But Reyna was already gone, sprinting out from the line of trees and across the moonlit expanse of the golf course. Immediately there were shouts. A helicopter rose from behind a banked sand trap, its air wash blowing sand that swirled and eddied in the glare of the craft's searchlights.

Veil waited, staring anxiously after Reyna's racing figure. Then the helicopter and police moved off after her, and the area directly in front of him was suddenly shrouded in darkness, providing him with a long, deserted corridor of night.

Toby was now semiconscious. Veil set the K'ung warrior on his feet. He wrapped his jacket around Toby, then pushed Reyna's sneakers on his feet. Deciding that they now had as good a chance in the streets as on the golf course, Veil steered Toby to the right, along the line of trees.

Toby tried to walk but could not. Again Veil swept the man up in his arms and hurried forward. There were no signs of any police.

He emerged from the line of trees at the point where the cemetery, the golf course, and the sidewalk intersected. Dozens of people were milling around in the street and on the sidewalk. Veil feared he might immediately be surrounded, but hardly anyone even bothered to glance at him or his burden; people were maneuvering for position in order to see out over the golf course, and everyone seemed to be talking at once, asking for or volunteering information.

"Get out of the way," Veil said, shouldering people aside. "I've got an injured person here."

A man called, "What's happening?"

"It looks as though they may have the African trapped in the cemetery," Veil replied. "Let me through, please."

And then he was through the crowd. He slipped through

a line of police cars parked at the curb with their motors running and lights flashing, then hurried across the street. He trotted into the next block, then stepped back into the night-shadows and waited. Ten minutes later Reyna, dressed and carrying the Nal-toon, emerged from an alleyway between two buildings near the intersection. Veil stepped out from the shadows. Reyna saw him, hurried down the street.

"*Voilà*!" Reyna said with a broad, triumphant grin. "Surprised?"

"*Surprised* isn't quite the word for it, but I can't think of what is," Veil replied, sighing with relief and gently touching his forehead to Reyna's. "How the hell did you get out of there?"

"A piece of cake. I made it into a stand of trees, hid the Nal-toon behind one, sat down, and started screaming. When the cops came, I just pointed and said that my boyfriend was chasing some crazy, naked black man who'd tripped over us. They ogled me for a while, then ran on. And here I am."

"I'm suitably impressed."

Reyna touched the unconscious Toby's forehead. "Lord, Veil, he's burning up."

"I know. We're running out of time. Check the parked cars and see if there are keys in any of them."

Reyna ran up and down the block, trying the doors and looking into the windows of the parked cars. She darted across the street, repeated the procedure, then ran back to Veil. "Nothing," she said, panting. "Do you want me to steal a police car?"

"No. They'd have us in five minutes. I could break into one and try jumping it, but the cops could be coming out of there anytime now. I'm afraid that carrying around Toby and the Nal-toon makes us a bit conspicuous." He paused, thinking, finally continued, "We're too close to what we want to risk losing it all by rushing things. The whole area's probably crawling with cops. After all that shooting in the cemetery, there could be roadblocks. What we need is a place to hole up, at least for a couple of hours."

"Veil, the racetrack! Aqueduct's only a few blocks away. If we could get in, there'd be water to cool Toby, and telephones! Do you think—"

"I certainly do," Veil said. "Let's go."

"Toby must be getting awfully heavy."

"No. Keep a steady pace. We're exposed now, and looking like we're in a big hurry will only draw more attention. Stay close and try to keep the Nal-toon between us."

They walked on, Reyna keeping close to Veil and using the Nal-toon and her shoulder to help support Toby's weight as best she could. People stopped and stared at them, but they continued walking at an even pace, their eyes straight ahead.

"I can see the parking lot!" Reyna cried as they turned a corner. "Veil, we're going to make it!"

Suddenly Toby stirred, opened his eye, spoke.

"Veil? Toby says that he can walk."

Veil set Toby on his feet. The K'ung swayed unsteadily, but remained on his feet. Reyna pressed the Nal-toon against his chest. Toby's arms came up, wrapped themselves tightly around his god. Veil and Reyna gripped Toby's arms, and they hurried forward until finally they stepped over a chain into the darkness of one of the racetrack's vast, empty parking lots.

"I'll run around," Reyna said. "There *has* to be some way for us to get in."

"No time," Veil said, taking the gun from the waistband of his jeans. "Too many people saw us, and I don't want to be wandering around if a police car comes cruising into this lot."

Using rags from a trash can to muffle the pistol's report, Veil fired two shots at the lock on one of the gates; the bullets served only to jam the locking mechanism. He was successful at a second gate; the first bullet pierced the lock pins cleanly and forced them apart. Reyna opened the gate, closed it behind them, and they moved into the racetrack.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The enormous clock on the wall over the bank of pay phones read eleven o'clock. A few of the trainers and jockeys who had arrived before dawn were still working their horses on the track, but the stands were empty—at least for the time being. There had been a few policemen wandering through the complex, but fewer than Veil had expected.

The phones were in the open, at the junction of a long concourse and an exit ramp. Hunched down behind a row of seats just behind the ramp, Veil scanned the area around him. Satisfied that there was no one around, he vaulted over a steel railing to the ramp, then hurried to the nearest phone. He dropped a quarter in the slot and dialed the number Walrus had given Reyna. The phone was answered in the middle of the first ring.

"Yeah."

"Walrus, we have a problem."

"Where are you?"

"Aqueduct. It looks pretty quiet around here at the

moment, but the police must be watching the neighborhood."

"Oh, you bet your ass they are. Besides the police, you've got what must be half the population of New York City wandering around Queens looking for the three of you. You'll have to wait until after dark."

"That's a long time to wait, Walrus. Toby's living on borrowed time. Is John there?"

"He's on another line talking to my documents people in Canada. You want me to get him?"

"No. There's nothing he could really tell me from there, anyway. I'm not a doctor, but I'm pretty sure that every hour counts with Toby."

"I hear what you're saying, Veil." There was a long pause, and then the mercenary on the other end of the line continued, "If you want, I'll bring a car over right now and take you out. What worries me is the possibility that a car going into an empty parking lot will attract attention; then we have to get the three of you and the idol out and into the car. If there are eyes on the place, we'll be fucked. If you can hold things together until tonight, at least it will be dark."

"We'll still have a problem, Walrus. They've got night racing here again."

"Shit. I thought they'd given up trying to compete with the Meadowlands."

"The city needs the tax revenues, so they decided to give it another shot. They refurbished the place and opened up for night racing about a month ago. They're getting good crowds."

There was a prolonged silence on the other end of the line, then, "Maybe the fact that the place will be open for business could work to our advantage. Horse players don't give a shit about anything but the tickets in their hands and what's happening on the track. The parking lot will be jammed with cars, and you should be able to move with the crowds. But you're there and I'm here; you have to make the decision."

There was no real decision to make, Veil thought. If they

were captured, Toby would die, anyway. "Tonight," he said.

"Okay. I'll leave John near a gate with the engine running, and I'll come in for you. Where will you be?"

"It'll be better if we stay with the crowds until it's time to split. Make it near the rail at the west end of the track."

"Nine-thirty?"

"Nine-thirty."

"How's the girl holding up?"

"She's all right."

"Tough cookie."

"Yeah. I hope to hell John thought to put a bottle of Scotch in that black bag of his."

"Would you believe he didn't?"

"But there's always the Walrus to think of these things, right?"

"Do sharks shit in the ocean? A quart of Chivas, gently filed between analgesics and antibiotics."

"See you later."

"Yup."

• • •

Veil and Reyna, with Toby propped up between them, stood near the outer restraining wall as the fourth race began. The K'ung, his bandaged head covered by one of the three hats Veil had taken from a maintenance equipment room, was conscious but leaning heavily on Reyna. Reyna stood with both arms wrapped around him, fingers tightly gripping his blue coveralls, trying to make it appear that they were lovers. Veil carried the Nal-toon, wrapped in a plastic trash bag.

As Walrus had suggested, no one in the crowd pressing around them paid the slightest bit of attention to anything but the details of their own special world, dominated by running horses and pari-mutuel tickets.

"Veil," Reyna whispered, "I'm afraid."

"We're almost home free."

"I'm still afraid. What you say is going to happen just seems too easy."

Veil glanced at Toby. The bushman's open eye was glassy, and he was bent forward with both hands pressed to his stomach. Sweat ran off his face in steady, glistening rivulets. Still, despite his obvious pain, Toby seemed to Veil strangely serene—as if the K'ung had given himself up totally to their care and was no longer concerned with what happened.

"You're just hooked on excitement and having to do things the hard way," Veil replied softly, reaching around Toby and gently squeezing Reyna's shoulder. "Don't worry. Walrus will walk us out of here to the car, and everything's going to be fine."

Reyna did not reply, and Veil glanced at his watch; it was nine twenty-five. He resisted the impulse to turn and try to see if Walrus was making his way down through the crowd toward them, for he did not want the people behind him to glimpse his face before it was necessary.

The roar of the crowd subsided at the finish of the race—only to be supplanted by a curious beating sound that came from somewhere in the darkness high above the racetrack. Veil cocked his head, listening intently.

"Holy shit."

"Veil, what's the matter?"

"Let's go," Veil said, gripping Toby's arm by the elbow and pulling the K'ung under the rail. "I do believe our ride is here."

"Wh—"

"Our chauffeur's decided on an alternate mode of transportation. Damn it, Reyna, *come*!"

The beating sound came closer, falling out of the sky just above the harsh glow cast by the floodlights circling the central oval. Two jockeys cooling out their mounts sharply reined in their horses at the sight of the three people crossing the dirt track in front of them; one horse bridled, throwing its rider.

A low murmur came from the crowd, quickly rose to an excited roar that had nothing to do with racehorses.

Veil and Reyna, dragging Toby between them, were already halfway to the center of the grass oval when the

Jet Ranger helicopter, its running lights out and its identification numbers masked, dropped into the brilliant sea of light, bounced once, then came to rest on the grass.

As had often happened to him in combat, Veil now experienced the strange sensation that he existed in a world apart from everything that was happening around him. Despite the din of the crowd and the beat of the helicopter blades, Veil had a peculiar sense of quiet inside his mind in which particular sounds were amplified—his own breathing, their muffled footsteps on the grass, Toby's hoarse, tortured gasps as he tried to run, stumbled, and was dragged forward.

And then they were at the helicopter. Walrus, a hulking man with massive, sloping shoulders and a face that was a map of scar tissue, was seated at the controls of the Jet Ranger, casually holding out a tumbler half filled with Scotch. A young man with smooth, handsome features and prematurely gray hair was leaning out of the open cargo bay, his hand extended. Dr. John Schneider grabbed Toby's hand and pulled him into the helicopter while Reyna jumped up and rolled inside.

Veil handed the Nal-toon to Schneider, then planted his palms on the metal edge and prepared to leap into the cargo bay.

Someone was tugging at his leg. Without turning, Veil swung his fist behind him. His knuckles hit bone, and the hands came off his leg. With Schneider pulling on his collar, Veil leapt into the cargo bay and grabbed the glass from Walrus's hand as the scar-faced man pulled back on the control stick and the craft rose into the air.

"Cheers," Veil said with a laugh as he braced himself against a strut and downed a Scotch.

"What was the order of finish in that last race?" Walrus asked as he banked to the left and just cleared the tops of the flags on the track's grandstand. "I couldn't see the board from up there."

"Sorry, I missed it too," Veil replied. "I was looking at my watch."

Walrus grunted, then turned his attention to the craft's

small radar screen, on which three blips had suddenly appeared. Reyna, who had been shrieking with exultant laughter and pounding the floor, abruptly sobered when she saw that Toby had passed out. John Schneider, who had been examining Toby's head wound, checked the K'ung's pulse, then quickly administered an injection.

"I think he'll be all right," Schneider announced calmly.

"Reyna," Veil said, "meet Dr. John Schneider, our onboard medico."

"Thank you so much, Doctor," Reyna said, tears springing to her eyes.

"My name's John," Schneider said easily, without looking up from Toby, "and you're quite welcome. Who could turn down a free trip to Africa?"

"Walrus," Veil said as he poured himself another drink, "you were always a showboat, but this is ridiculous."

"Yeah," Walrus replied absently as he continued to study the blips on the radar screen. "Sorry about the change of plan. I sent Raskolnikov out on the point a couple of hours ago, and he reported an inordinate number of policemen taking an inordinate interest in every car leaving the track. All things considered, an airlift seemed like the best idea. Raskolnikov couldn't come in and tell you, because we were afraid he'd be spotted."

"How the hell did you come up with a Jet Ranger in two hours?"

"Ah, my friend, you wound me. You don't think I make contingency plans?"

"Sorry I asked."

"Reyna?" Walrus said, reaching back with his right hand. "As you may have guessed, I'm the Walrus. Come up here and let me kiss the hand of a gutsy lady."

Reyna, helped by Veil, walked forward, grasped Walrus's hand in both of hers, and kissed it. "Walrus, what can I say? How can I ever thank you?"

"Listen, m'dear, if you knew what a grand time Kendry, Schneider, and I are having, you'd realize that you don't

have to say anything. Incidentally, open the brown envelope under my seat. That's for Toby. I figured he might want a souvenir to show his buddies."

Reyna opened the envelope and giggled when she saw the *Tourist Guide to New York City*. She stepped forward to kiss Walrus's cheek, then tensed when she saw his face. "What's the matter?"

"Lie flat on the floor," Walrus said curtly. "Wrap your fingers around the ridges and hang on. John, is that bay door secure?"

"Roger."

Reyna dropped to the floor, braced herself by grabbing hold of Veil's forearm. "Walrus . . . ?"

Walrus banked ninety degrees to his left and dropped still lower. "Those are cop 'copters," he said, nodding toward the radar screen, "or maybe Coast Guard. Unlighted, unidentified aircraft flying through city airspace makes them nervous and cranky."

"Oh, God," Reyna said, squeezing Veil's leg. "What are we going to do?"

"Lose them, of course."

"*How?*"

"Not to worry," Walrus said as he banked right and the helicopter scudded over the roof of a high rise. A white smudge had appeared at the top of the radar screen; Walrus flipped a switch beneath the screen, switching to a different mode, and the smudge became dozens of small blips. "We'll cut across JFK. That's a radar jungle. They won't follow us through there."

"Why not?"

"Because they'd be crazy to," Schneider answered dryly from the rear of the bay where he was lying across Toby and the Nal-toon. "They know they'd be killed."

Reyna glanced up, saw that the radar screen was now aglow with what seemed hundreds of tiny lights. Still holding tightly to Veil, she eased herself up into a sitting position beside him just in time to see brightly lit buildings and runways flashing by beneath and on either side of them. Shouting voices crackled in the air, and

Walrus abruptly turned the radio off. A 747 emerged from the darkness ahead of them, slanted across, and landed no more than two hundred yards to their right.

"Reyna?" Veil said quietly.

"Huh?"

"Do you believe in happy endings?"

Reyna was staring wide-eyed, mouth open, at the frenzy of activity all around them. The helicopter swooped over a building Reyna recognized as the International Arrivals Building. "What . . . huh?"

"I asked if you believe in happy endings."

"*What?*"

"Reyna," Walrus said, "tell him he'll get his answer *after* I land this thing."

And then they were beyond the airport. The lights on the radarscope dimmed as Walrus switched back to a mode with a tighter focus. There was no one following them.

Thirteen minutes later Walrus brought the helicopter down in a remote, dark corner of Flushing Airport. A two-engine jet was tied down off to one side of the weed-covered field, and Walrus taxied to within a few yards of it. Veil was the first out, and he took Toby's unconscious body from Schneider. Schneider jumped down, took Toby from Veil, and carried the K'ung to the plane. He strapped Toby onto a cot, then started the plane's engines.

Walrus was already out and busy ripping tape from the helicopter's identification numbers. Reyna, the *Tourist Guide to New York City* clenched tightly in her fist, jumped down from the cargo bay and threw her arms around Veil.

"Yes!" Reyna shouted, kissing Veil hard on the mouth.

"Yes?"

"Yes, I do believe in happy endings!"

Then Walrus was standing beside them, his huge arms draped around their shoulders. "No time for chitchat, folks. You two want to come along? I'm betting the cops are really pissed, if you'll pardon the understatement, and I'm betting they have a pretty good idea who they're pissed at."

Veil and Reyna smiled at each other. "I don't think so,"

Veil said to Walrus. "What the police think and what they can prove are two different things. Don't forget to write."

"I'll call whenever I can and keep you posted on progress. Try to stay out of the can."

"Yeah."

Walrus took the *Tourist Guide* from Reyna, kissed her. "Raskolnikov is probably out cruising on the highway looking for you two," Walrus shouted over his shoulder as he ran toward the plane. "I'll be in touch!"

"Be safe, my friend," Veil said quietly.

Veil and Reyna stood with their arms around each other, staring into the empty sky, long after the plane's lights had disappeared. Then they turned and, hand in hand, walked toward the lights of the city.

Chapter Nineteen

Veil dreams.

Vivid dreaming is his gift and affliction, the lash of memory and a guide to justice, a mystery and sometimes the key to mystery, prod to violence and maker of peace, an invitation to madness, and the fountainhead of his power as an artist.

Once again, for the last time, Veil is Toby.

He has never felt quite this way before. There is a lightness in his chest and inside his mind that is new, and he understands that these feelings are gifts from the Naltoon. Only as a small child did he ever laugh or cry, yet now he feels like laughing and crying at the same time; he does and is not ashamed. He suspects that these new feelings will stay with him for the rest of his life.

He is different now than when he left, Veil thinks. He is filled with love. He thinks of Reyna and the man-in-night with love.

He even thinks of the two silly, old missionaries with love; they had kissed him when he had come down with

the two *Newyorkcities* in their flying machine, and he had kissed the missionaries back.

He had stripped off his *clothes* and sat stiffly in the back of the *Landrover*, Nal-toon and Reyna's *paper* in his lap, as they had set off across the desert. However, despite his eagerness to reach his people, he had insisted during the night that they stop and rest. While the missionaries slept, Veil had stood watch over them.

It is the first time Veil has ever really cared about anyone who was not K'ung.

But the missionaries had also been anxious to reach the camp, and they had only slept a short while. Now, with a luminous dawn glowing in the sky behind them, Veil smells a campfire. He asks the missionaries to stop, which they do. Once again he kisses both of them, then gets out.

He walks up a dune and stands looking down on his people who have heard the approaching *Landrover* and are waiting expectantly. They see him, rise to their feet. With the sun burning behind him, Veil lifts the Nal-toon and Reyna's *paper* over his head, draws air deep into the light place in his heart, and screams with joy and triumph before rolling away to another dream that is more than a dream.

"Veil, come to me. Love me. Tango with me on the edge of time."

Electric-blue flight, Veil speeds toward love and promises to be kept.

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George C. Chesbro was born in Washington D.C., and is a graduate of Syracuse University. A resident of Rockland County, New York, Mr. Chesbro was a teacher of Special Education until 1979, when he resigned his position to write full time. In addition to his critically acclaimed suspense novels featuring the dwarf criminologist Mongo and the clairvoyant artist Veil Kendry, he has published numerous short stories, poems, and articles. His far-ranging interests include chess, music, and the infinite variety of human belief systems. He now divides his time between writing and various jobs that interest him, including working with severely disturbed adolescents.

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